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AMAZING STORIES



THE ULTIMATE PERIL

By ROBERT ABERNATHY

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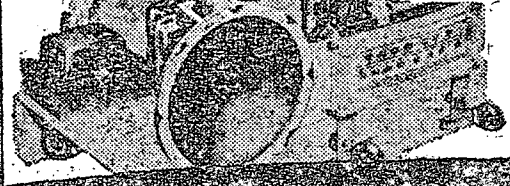
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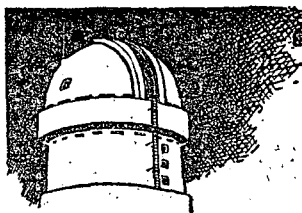
Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating
 a scene from "The Ultimate Peril."

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The OBSERVATORY

..... *by the Editor*

JUST TO GIVE you an idea of the uncertainties of an editor's schedule, this Month's "Observatory" is being written in an office on the 46th floor of the Empire State Building in New York, instead of our usual desk in Chicago. At the moment we have a bird's-eye view of skyscraper peaks and the Hudson River, looking chill and remote under a winter sun, to the west.

OUR REASON for being in New York is two-fold: to arrange to bring you still better stories in this—and our other—magazines, and to do some advance planning on another matter, which, when it finally materializes, will make a lot of people very happy—particularly your editor, who is on the verge of seeing one of his fondest dreams come true. Of course, all this "hush-hush" stuff isn't to your liking any more than it is to ours; but we couldn't resist hinting about it. Perhaps in next month's column we can take off the veil....

THIS MONTH'S AMAZING STORIES comes pretty well up to what we think "The Old Aristocrat of Science-Fiction" should be. The cover, as you've already decided, is right in there with the best we've ever brought you, and it illustrates a scene from one of the finest science-fiction yarns it has been our privilege to read in a long, long time. Plenty of science based on a unique interpretation of natural laws, breathlessly paced adventure, and a hero and heroine you'll not forget in a long time. It was written by a young man we'd never heard of before, although we learned, after buying "The Ultimate Peril", that this is not his first published yarn.

ROBERT W. ABERNATHY is his name, and if we know anything about this business at all, you'll be seeing a lot of him from now on. We've set aside a page at the end of "The Ultimate Peril" to give you a picture of him and a few hundred words about his views on the science-fiction story. Originally he was supposed to write about himself, but it seems he has the fitting modesty of a newcomer to the field

and left himself pretty much out of the article.

OTHER ITEMS in this month's issue to let you see we weren't fooling when we announced that AMAZING STORIES was to have that "new look": stories by such leaders in the field as William F. Temple, Ward Moore, Craig Browning and Ward Hawkins. Each of these is a writer of stature in the genre—a man whose work you've come across before and enjoyed immensely. Temple, for instance, appeared years ago in this same magazine with a novelette that has long been hailed as a classic, and we honestly believe that "For Each Man Kills..." will rank equally as high in your estimation.

WARD MOORE, who wrote "The Sword of Peace" expressly for us, was one of the truly fine writers we met during our two years in California. He's a tall, wide-shouldered guy who looks like a longshoreman, wears a goatee, of all things, and is about the most articulate man we've ever met. His novel "Greener Than You Think", published by Sloane a couple of years ago, is not only a superb fantasy but a satire worthy of Swift himself. Recently it was reprinted in England and proved to be a tremendous seller there. If you haven't read it, we urge you to pick up a copy and learn for yourself why it will be read and re-read long after most of the current crop of fantasy novels are forgotten.

BEFORE GOING any further there's something we'd like especially to call your attention to in this copy of your favorite science-fiction magazine. That's the new type of article, or "fillers", as they're popularly called. Up until now they've been informative and factual, but we've always felt they were a bit on the—well—tedious side. If you've been in the habit of skipping over them lately for that reason, take a look at them now and see what we've done to improve them!—HB

THE END

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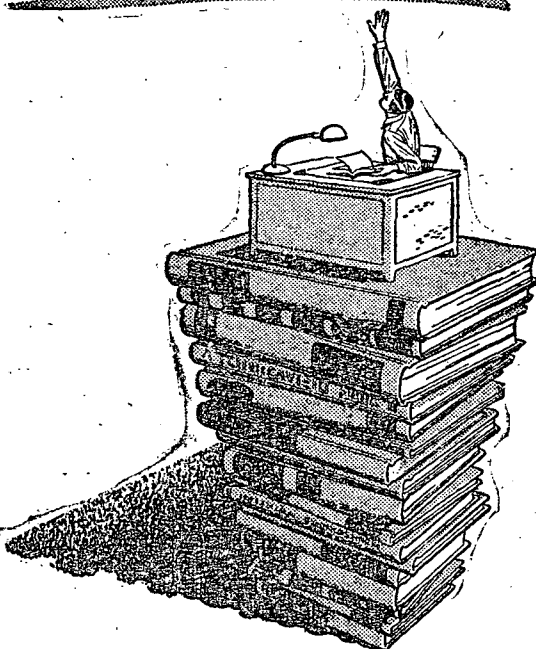
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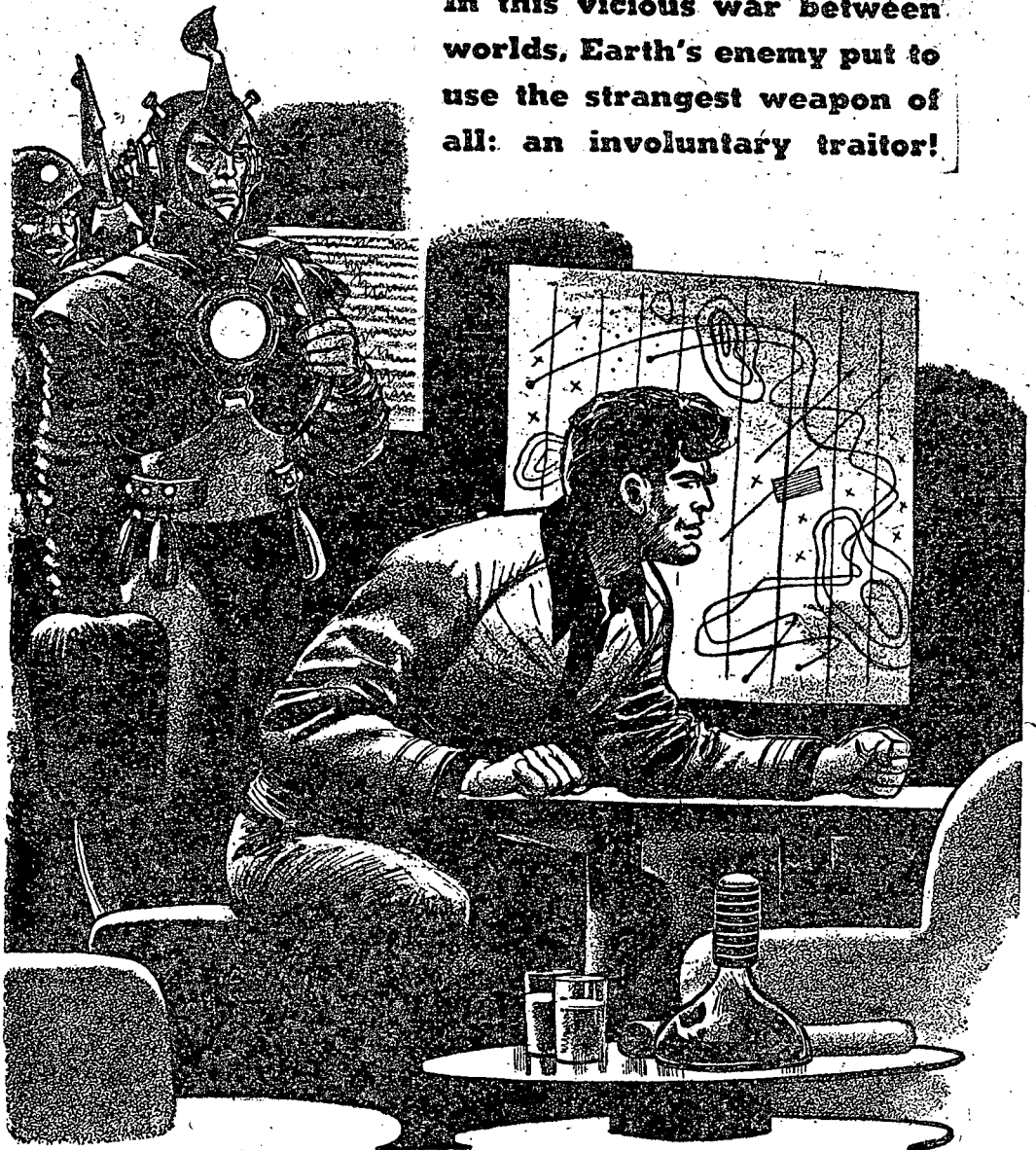
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THE ULTIMATE PERIL

By Robert Abernathy

In this vicious war between worlds, Earth's enemy put to use the strangest weapon of all: an involuntary traitor!





She sat staring straight at him, and yet her eyes seemed to see something else . . .

THE *Sheneb* was five thousand tons, built in Venusian yards as a copy, line for line, of an Earth cargo carrier. As such she had served her first few years, driving crewless between Venus and its colonies on the outer worlds.

Now she was converted. Lusterless black, absorbent not only to light but

also to far longer wave lengths, hid her magnesium skin, and an atomic blast gun peered threateningly from an airless swivel turret built clumsily into her once clean-cut nose. That was for war.

For her present purpose there were other changes. The cargo decks had been stripped of all equipment and

sealed off by partitions from the engine and control rooms forward. That was to protect the Venusian crew from the poisonous oxygen breathed by the prisoners in the hold.

After thirty hours in space, twenty-six under zero acceleration, the cargo decks were uninhabitable. But men, women and children still clung to life there, a tangle of bodies helplessly adrift in the fetid air. The Venusians had provided little ventilation, no light, and no waste disposal mechanism, which last was a peculiar horror in the weightlessness.

But perhaps worst of all was the darkness. It denied them the little comfort of seeing other human faces in their hell. And in the darkness no one could count the living and the dead. And if, floating in that black pit, you bumped against a rigid body, it was not worth the effort to find out whether the stiffness was that of death or the cramped rigidity of space sickness—not the nausea that had wrenched most of the prisoners in the first hours, but the other space sickness that was worse—zero neurosis, free-fall hysteria, any names there are for the primitive terror of falling, falling endlessly into blackness for more than an Earth day now. Very few knew how to take that sensation; many gasped and fought for a support that was not there and lapsed at last into a paralysis of fear.

Not long after acceleration had ceased, the word was passed round that Favreau, Ambassador of All the Nations, was dead. That might mean something in interplanetary politics—but here he was only one of many dead.

A woman's voice, a girl's by the sound of it, was sobbing and talking through sobs, trying to rouse someone named Jim—and failing.

Another voice interrupted her, speaking almost in Ralph Degnan's

ear: "Better let him be. If it's zero neurosis, he may be luckier than we are." Degnan recognized the voice as that of the doctor who had tried to calm and help during those first hours of darkness and crushing acceleration and terror. The doctor went on, explaining quietly, as if he were in the clinic, "In that condition blood is drawn away from the brain. It helps combat the derangement of blood pressure in free fall, that may bring on cerebral hemorrhage. Zero neurosis may be a survival mechanism."

"Survival?" The girl-voice caught up the word, and laughed with a surprising, bitter energy. "I've been praying for the deflectors to fail when a meteor comes in our path."

The conversation, so close and yet invisible, irritated Ralph Degnan's raw nerves in ways he didn't stop to analyze. He said savagely, "If you've got to pray, why don't you make it for an Earth warship? And dammit, doc—you don't have to be scared, to live in free fall."

IN THE silence, Degnan could hear unhurried breathing close beside him. He sensed that the doctor was trying to see him, studying the tones of his voice.

Finally, the steady voice said, "Perhaps you're not afraid, my friend. I'm sure I am, both of *now* and when I try to imagine life in a prison on Neptune... But I think you're upheld by another emotion that has much the same physiological effects as fear. Anger, or hate."

"I'm waiting," said Degnan flatly. "The Venusians never make a mistake—they think. They and their 'total mentality'. I'm waiting."

"There's no chance here."

"Maybe on Neptune, if that is where they're taking us."

The girl's voice came out of the

blackness, sounding frightened, uncertain. "Who are you? I don't think you're one of us."

"Who's 'us'?"

"Most of the people here," explained the doctor, "are from the colony at Ghrup Shiyap. Attached to the embassy there, as I was. Even when we heard—we hoped we'd have some diplomatic immunity. Maybe we do—they haven't killed us outright."

"I was a clerk in the embassy. I got the job to be with Jim—my brother." The girl's voice shivered. "There wasn't any warning. Only a radio flash—and then they came for us—"

"I believe," said the doctor soberly, "that all the Earth people on Venus were rounded up within an hour of the first news of fighting. The Over Race is efficient."

"They were even more efficient in my case." The others couldn't see Degnan's twisted grin. "They put the finger on me two weeks ago. I didn't know the war had begun until they shoved me on board this ship."

"We don't know much more. It was reported that a Venusian cruiser fired at installations on the Moon, that Callisto was bombarded by Earth ships. No major engagements."

"There will be," said Degnan with grim confidence. "After what they've done, Venus is at war with every country on Earth. That makes the odds in first-class battleships alone better than thirty to their one—and in manpower, if you can call theirs that, still better. We'll smash them."

"I hope you're right," said the doctor, a queer doubtful note in his voice.

The girl asked hesitantly, "Where were you? Before they arrested you, I mean."

"In the Gray Barrens near Ghrup Unur," said Degnan. "Trading with the Under Race... Those are Venus-

ians a man can deal with. Their minds work like ours."

The doctor remarked unemotionally, "Our captors would say that's because we're savages, too."

DEGNAN said nothing. His hatred of the Venusian Over Race was too deep and too precious to waste in words. But the stifled sound that did escape him must have been expressive, for the girl spoke in a new voice, rich with pity: "They must have hurt you terribly. I don't see how anybody could live through two weeks of being their prisoner."

It was like running into something sharp and hard in the enfolding blackness. It jarred the fierce intent anger out of him and left him feeling hollow and weak.

He said shakily, "I don't know. I don't remember what they did to me." His eyes stared into the darkness until he saw points and darts of light that weren't there.

"What's the matter?" inquired the doctor's even voice.

"Twelve days," muttered Degnan hoarsely. "I'm sure of that, anyway. That long between the time they grabbed me and when they put me aboard... But I don't know what happened in those twelve days."

"That's not unusual, you know. Frequently the mind rejects a memory that's too painful."

Degnan didn't answer. He was groping, trying to sound out the frightening abyss that had suddenly opened in his own mind, his own memory.

"Whatever you've forgotten is over and done," the doctor reminded him gently.

Degnan shook his head to clear it, said between his teeth, "Sure. That's right. What matters now is getting out of this, back to Earth—"

He stopped, jolted by the loudness

of his own voice. The darkness of the hold had grown suddenly denser with the death-stillness around. The weary murmur of voices, the fainter rustle of movement, had stopped as if everyone had become stone.

And it seemed to Degnan that he had seen a faint light flicker and vanish, but had thought it a trick of his eyes. The next moment he knew it had been real, as a chilly sibilance, like a snake's sound, cut through the silence and came nearer.

He caught an eye-stinging whiff of formaldehyde. There were gasps of hard-held human breath, and the sighing hiss of the propulsion tubes attached to the Venusian's body as it moved purposefully among the helplessly floating, blind Earth people. It could see, no doubt, if only dimly by infra-red in the stifling-hot hold.

DEGNAN knew by the stench that the creature was hanging very near him, motionless, for the hissing had ceased. Perhaps it was watching him and no other, with those great sightless-looking eyes whose glittering reflections under light would seem an empty fire of hell....

He almost screamed, and twisted convulsively like a hooked fish—which for all practical purposes he was, for a fang of hot metal had bitten through his shirt and skin at the meeting of shoulder and neck. He felt the barb grate against his collarbone and pain came flooding as he was yanked into motion through the air. Then he was drifting free again—and a hard invisible wall collided violently with him. He scrabbled at it, seeking a hold that would let him launch himself at the enemy he could not see, and the effort thrust him away from the wall to dangle helplessly in the blackness where there was no up, no down, nor

any way at all, and he did not know whether the smarting in his eyes was from tears of rage or from the creature's formaldehyde reek.

Someone whimpered like a trapped animal, and Degnan collided again—this time with something soft and moving, another human. They embraced one another by common consent, with the blind need to grasp at a stay in the spinning void. Then Degnan knew that the other was a woman; he felt her strangled sobbing and heard it in his ear, and by that sound was sure it was the girl he had been talking to a few moments ago.

"Steady," he muttered foolishly. "Maybe it won't—"

Something blunt and hard punched him breathtakingly between the shoulder-blades, and lights danced before his eyes. Some of the light persisted until he knew it was really there. The Venusian had propelled the two of them, still clinging together, through an opening door into a communication shaft, and there was dim red light in the shaft, enough that Degnan could see and reach out to snatch at the handholds fixed inside it—

He was thrust sickeningly, painfully away. They drifted along the tube toward brighter light, and as their bodies turned slowly in air, Degnan saw the Venusian following. Its hunched leggy form—which, if it had been far, far smaller, scuttling round and round in a kitchen sink, would have been merely disgusting—differed not at all from that of the Under Race, with some of whose members Degnan had talked and traded and almost made friends. But the huge compound eyes, that gave it three hundred and sixty degrees of vision, gleamed with the bale-fires of a dreadful intelligence. Or perhaps you only thought you saw in those

eyes what you knew was behind them: the total mentality of the Over Race, which might be called super-human with as much or as little justice as man's mind could be called supercanine...

It had a long-hafted goad like an elephant man's hook, with which it prodded them impatiently once more. It must be uncomfortable here. The air in the shaft was muggy-hot and stifling with formaldehyde gas, but it was humanly endurable, which meant that the Venusian, save for its breathing apparatus and the complicated protective garment that sheathed most of it, would have died in it almost equally fast from oxygen poisoning and from freezing.

There was something funny—the Venusians had gone to the trouble of exhausting their own air from this part of the ship and replacing it with something like Earth-normal. They must have some very special motive for fishing two living humans out of the hold. Degnan's flesh crawled when he tried to guess the reasons they could have.

THE MONSTER behind thrust them forward again, and they drifted out of the communication shaft into a room—forward of the ship, Degnan judged by its size, and lighted with the murky red glow that was all human eyes could register of what for Venusians was a brilliant illumination.

There were two more Over Beings here, afloat side by side, watching. Degnan knew more about Venusians than most men, but he couldn't read their expressions—his experience among the Under Race didn't help him there; these creatures were as different in mind from their poor relations as they were in body from man. But he recognized the insignia one of them wore as those of a high

officer in the Venusian fleet—surprisingly high to be aboard this miserable cargo shell. Both of them were armed, and Degnan's other thoughts were lost in the craving to get his hands on one of those weapons.

He saw something else that made his heart bound with illogical hope. At four places around the red-lit chamber's periphery, the wall bulged smoothly inward, and an airseal door was inset into each curve. Those, on this model of ship, marked the berths where emergency rockets, provisioned and fueled, were carried when a crew was aboard... And one of those doors was standing open, more red light glowing beyond.

The madness of the idea didn't occur to Degnan then. He twisted and got his first look at the girl he was holding and who held to him. Her face floated before—above, below?—him, ghost-pale in the bloody light, darkly haloed by hair that drifted in wild weightless disorder. As he had half-expected from her terrified rigidity, her eyes were wide, dilated, unseeing. He tried briefly to pry one of her hands loose from his arm, and knew he would have to break her fingers first.

She had to be jarred out of it, and that inside seconds. Already he could hear the hissing of the third Venusian's air-tubes, emerging from the shaft.

Degnan clenched his teeth and slapped the girl's face; her panic grip loosened, and he caught her by the shoulders and shook her till he was afraid her neck would snap. But he saw her lips move, the pupils of her eyes return to normal size, and he whispered sharply, "Do you hear me?"

She nodded dazedly. The Venusian that had brought them out of the hold was hovering close, barbed goad

poised; the red chamber was turning slowly about them. Degnan whispered, "There's one chance. When I say 'Go!', we'll shove off in opposite directions. Action and reaction. You try to occupy the one there; I'll take the two on the other side."

She drew a shuddering breath, said, "All right." He was thankful she didn't add what they both knew—that the chance was no chance at all.

"Get ready, then," said Degnan harshly. They braced themselves against each other and waited for their slow rotation to bring them into position...

The high-ranking Venusian floated into Degnan's field of vision with a soft hissing. One of its almost-hands of delicate claws and flattened pads was extended, holding something that gleamed and that Degnan recognized—too late, a fractional instant before it exploded into blinding light.

The flare was literally blinding; when it vanished he could see only confused darkness. He had met it before, when he was seized, and knew it for one of the Over Race's clever new devices for dealing with Earthmen—one harmless to themselves, since it used light invisible to Venusians. But there was something funny about this time. The darkness didn't stay on and slowly clear up, but he and shadow, seemed to be plunging into concentrically smaller circles of buzzing nothingness, himself dwindling away to nothing, losing consciousness....

THE RED light burned once more.

The air was murk-red, close and stuffy, and something somewhere was going "Blip...blip. Blip...blip," in a curious paired rhythm.

And someone was shaking him by the shoulders, almost in time to the noises. Degnan snorted, gulped down

a sudden sickness, and sat up, looking into the face of the dark-haired girl.

"Turn about's fair play," he said dizzily, "but you can stop now."

She drew back, gazing at him with intense relief. "Thank heavens! Now maybe you can do something."

Degnan threw his legs over the edge of the bunk he had been lying on and stared blurrily at gleaming dials and instruments set into an opposite wall, very close and curving. He passed a hand across his eyes. "Do—what?"

"Find out where we're going—and—and do something about it."

The man's head was clearing. Now he became aware of the low monotonous rumble of a rocket drive; that, and the cramped quarters, and the red light, told him where they were. But once oriented, he only felt more bewildered. They were in an emergency rocket from the Venusian freighter, and it was under power.

The girl was watching him as if expecting him to produce a rabbit from a nonexistent hat. Her hair, still tangled, hung normally about her face now—one Venus gravity would be the acceleration of the lifeboat—and the traces of hysteria were gone. She was as rumpled and soiled as Degnan; she was thin, and her face with its bright expectant eyes held shadow-smudges of suffering. And for all that she reminded him somehow of Athalie—Athalie far away and dear, a part of the pleasant dream that life on Earth seemed now. But Athalie was blonde and richly curved, and he had never seen her other than immaculately clean, sweet-smelling, well-groomed....

He heaved himself shakily erect, glancing round the interior of the rocket. Half of it was bunks, uncomfortable but endurable for man or Venusian, three of them, one above the other; the other half was filled

by an instrument panel with another bunk above that. The blipping came from the panel and went on and on maddeningly.

The controls he saw were odd-shaped, made for Venusian claws, but mostly recognizable; few and simple compared to those of a regular space ship. The rocket was not equipped for complex navigation or sightseeing; there were no vision devices, no calculator.

"That noise," Degnan said over his shoulder, "is a radar echo. This type of boat has an elementary pilot mechanism that automatically heads for the nearest planet-sized body. It's bouncing a beam off the nearest planet—listen." The thing went 'Blip... blip.' The interval is the time it takes for the echo to get back. Twice the distance to the planet in light-time. Which means it's pretty close. If it's Earth, we'd be inside the Moon's orbit."

"If it's— Do you think it's Earth?"

"Yes," said Degnan deliberately. "That's the likeliest—considering how long the *Sheneb* accelerated and how long we were in free flight, we could hardly have been close to anything else. It couldn't very well be Mars, and Mercury's beyond the Sun..."

"Earth!" the girl said in a choked voice. She watched him with puzzled eyes as he turned away and sat down heavily on the bunk's edge again. "But—aren't you going to—"

"—do something?" Degnan shrugged ironically. "The robot's steering on the radar-sight, and I couldn't do any better. There should be an automatic parachute-release, too, when we hit atmosphere—but we won't need that. Earth's at war now, and nothing bigger than a ~~wabble~~

could slip past the interceptor barrage. We ought to be picked up before long."

"Oh," sighed the girl.

"Now," said Degnan, "let's you tell *me* something. What happened? How'd we get here?"

She looked at him blankly. "Why—we got away—didn't we?"

"We were about to try. But I didn't duck in time."

"Oh, yes—your plan." She smiled uncertainly, a frown puckering her brows. "Evidently it worked."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Degnan rudely. "We both must have passed out."

HE THOUGHT hard, aching head in his hands. And cloudy pictures rose in his brain—memories, or half-memories, plucked with difficulty out of emptiness. Himself, wresting the steel-tipped goad from the Venusian's grip—battering at the others with it, smashing a chitinous head. A couple of jointed legs afloat in the air and twitching gruesomely. Thrusting the girl through the open door, diving after her. Launching the lifeboat into space....

In clipped syllables he imparted those fragments to the girl as they occurred to him, and she nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Yes, that's the way it was."

Degnan flexed his right arm and tested the muscles of his back likewise. He said, "I'm stiff and sore enough to have been in a fight. And if we both remember it, it must be so. But neither of us remembers very clearly—isn't that right? In other words, something smells!"

"You know what the doctor said about memories."

"Uh-huh. We forget unpleasant things." Degnan smiled grimly. "But

if I really smashed up three Over Racers—that's a pleasure I'd never forget. And I'd feel good now—but I don't. That bothers me, too." The girl gazed at him helplessly. Degnan grinned with sudden abandon. "The answer I can think of—I must be a dual personality, and one of me's a superman. That's the only way we could have got away like that; we didn't have the chance of a snowball in hell."

He got restlessly to his feet, paced the cramped space of the rocket's cabin. His last sharp-etched memory was of that greater red-lit chamber aboard the *Sheneb*, the watching monsters, the blinding light. Beyond that everything was fuzzy, even now that they had compared notes. And something else was eluding him. Something was wrong about here and now, about this ship.

He turned sharply on the girl. "Look—what are we breathing here?"

She stared wide-eyed and said without conviction, "Air."

"Obviously. But where's it coming from?"

"The aerator. I knew enough to check that, before you came to."

"Yeah, sure," said Degnan softly. "But that's a Venusian aerator. It should be turning out formaldehyde—not oxygen. Furthermore, the temperature here's about thirty degrees Centigrade, where a Venusian thermostat should be holding it at a hundred."

She bit her lip. "Then—the Venusians must have fixed it that way. On purpose."

Degnan looked at her with a surprised new respect. "Go on," he urged. "Develop that thought."

"I—can't," she faltered. "I don't see why."

"Neither do I," said Degnan

blackly, and resumed his pacing. "But so help me, I'm going to."

The girl gazed at him with veiled intentness. She saw a rough-hewn face masked now by two weeks' growth of crisp black beard—that must have got its swarthinness from an admixture of American Indian blood, whence also high cheekbones, and a thin, determined mouth that might under the wrong conditions be cruel. It was not the face of a man accustomed to be baffled long.

"Yes," she murmured, "I think you will."

IT WAS less than an hour later when the radarscope changed its note abruptly and emitted sharp staccato sounds that, translated from interplanetary code, were a peremptory "Heave to!"

Degnan had made a note of the rocket control; he shut the power off and, floating weightless once more, sought for and found a two-way radio. He tuned it, and brought in a hard-boiled voice, speaking English with a Latin accent, which said it was the Chilean battle cruiser *O'Higgins*, and ordered, "No funny tricks. You are covered, *senores cucarachas!*"

With fervent persuasiveness, Degnan explained that they were not cockroaches, they were human. The voice sounded unconvinced, then half-convinced—all the same, a booby-trap expert must board them before they could be picked up by the cruiser.

"That," Degnan admitted, "is a sound idea."

The girl caught her breath. "Do you think this ship is a trap with us for bait? That would explain—"

"If in a few minutes we get blown to atoms," said Degnan levelly, "it'll

just about explain everything."

But after some fifteen minutes the lifeboat, pronounced safe as inspection could make it, was engulfed by a huge lading lock in the cruiser's side.

Aboard the *O'Higgins* there was gravity again—naturally, since the cruiser had, like all modern warships and very few other vessels, a full gravitic drive, which meant that its acceleration was limited not by human capacity to endure but by its power plant's ability to give out, and that it could spiral faster than an ordinary ship could travel a straight line.

Degnan, bedraggled, unshaven and red-eyed, clambered out of the lifeboat's airlock and confronted a brown smooth-faced little man immaculately glittering in uniform.

"I am Menendez, *capitan de la Armada del Espacio*. And who are you, who come to us under circumstances so peculiar?"

"Ralph Degnan's my name; better make a note of it," said Degnan curtly. "The two of us have just left the custody of our friends the cockroaches; we couldn't be choosy about the circumstances. Ex-freighter *Sheneb*, apparently heading toward Neptune..." He glanced sidelong at the girl; she looked ready to faint now that rescue was an accomplished fact, and was making futile absent-minded efforts to repair her face and costume, without seeming to pay attention to what was being said. Nevertheless, he switched to Spanish, becoming more polite in obedience to the form of the language: "If Your Honor pleases, I will request that he land me at the city of Los Angeles."

Captain Menendez raised a startled eyebrow. He said stiffly, "We land at Valparaiso, six days from now."

"*Es preciso*." Degnan's eyes bored steadily into the other's. "If Your Honor will check my identity with North American Military Intelligence..."

The captain was startled again, with the other eyebrow. He recovered himself. "Very well. By all means, *senor* Degnan. And while the check is being made, with what may I serve..."

"*Un bano!*" said Degnan prayerfully.

A BATH and shave achieved in the cramped facilities of a cabin in officers' quarters, and the food he was brought devoured, Degnan lit the first luxurious cigarette in two weeks and thought briefly of the dark-haired girl—mostly of how little he knew about her. He didn't know who or what she was—or even whether that was important.

What was important—a gnawing feeling told him—was the confusion in his own memory. The enemy had done that, somehow; on Venus, Degnan knew, psychology was the mother of sciences, like physics on Earth, and they had had plenty of chance to study the human mind, which they considered so inferior to their own.

It was so vivid, that glimpse of a Venusian like a smashed bug sprawling in midair, a couple of detached legs jerking. Vivid, but somehow it lacked the essential stuff of reality. It fed without appeasing his bitter hatred of the Over Race.

He couldn't say just why he hated them so intensely. It was a feeling scarcely connected with what he, personally, had suffered; the best reason he could think of was his instinctive sense of their abnormality, some monstrosity about them wholly apart from their unhuman

form. In a sense, the dominant species of Venus was an artificial product; they didn't come normally from eggs like the Under Race, but out of the hot spawning beds where forcing and selection kept the recessive mutation that had created them alive.

Degnan shook his head angrily. The Venusians couldn't have made him a tool in any fantastic scheme they might have for getting behind Earth's defenses. That left the lifeboat—which some time ago had been cast off into space, headed back toward Venus with jammed controls. And the girl: was she Number One? She looked like only an unhappy young woman who had been an inconspicuous clerk until caught in the vortex of interplanetary war, who was as innocent as her story... which could be checked easily, of course.

He wouldn't have to worry about her any more. Unless—which was unlikely—they ordered him to when he reported in Los Angeles. He lit a second—or was it a third?—cigarette, and tried to let the smoke sooth away his trick memories and the all-too-real recollection of the black and crimson hell on the *Sheneb*.

A knock at the cabin door, and an orderly was there, saying respectfully: "*El capitan le atiende.*"

Captain Menendez was affable. "It is impossible for the *O'Higgins* to leave her patrol, Colonel Degnan—but a North American liaison vessel will come alongside to take you off and to Los Angeles. That will be before very many minutes now. Your Intelligence was delighted to hear that one of their agents had escaped the claws of the Venusians. *Y es verdaderamente un milagro, no?*"

"A miracle—yes," admitted Degnan with gloomy reserve. That was just

what was bothering him so much.

Menendez looked puzzled; he said severely, "You are more lucky than you know. I have received a dispatch about the ship that you escaped from—a freighter, was it not, of a type like our M3s?" Degnan nodded.

"Then it can be no other. It tried to run away, and the warship that had ordered it to stop was forced to open fire."

"And the people—the Earth people on it?" asked Degnan with stiff lips.

The captain shrugged. "Of course their presence was not known," he said apologetically, then brightened: "But you see how effective is the Patrol. If the *cucarachas* come close enough to look at our Earth—one pounce and we are on them!" He glanced round him, swelling a little, and Degnan sensed the little man's proud confidence in the steel length and strength of his great ship, its power and its armaments that could lay waste to a whole planet's surface. The Venusians too had ships like this, but not as many as the United Nations of Earth; and in the tremendous battleships, compared to which a mere cruiser was a mosquito, they were hopelessly outnumbered.

"Tell me," said Degnan, "how has the war gone? Where I've been, there wasn't any news."

Menendez shrugged again. "Nor have we heard much. In the last days our forces have occupied Neptune and the Venusian moons of Jupiter and Saturn, but that was a trifling affair; they had been evacuated already. So far we are defensive; we guard ourselves and prepare. Of course," he tried to look knowing. "I cannot tell you the plans of the Combined Fleets. But one thing I tell you: this war will not be long."

"I hope you're right," said Degnan, then realized that he was repeating the doubtful words of the doctor on the *Sheneb*.

"Oh, yes—one more business. Do you wish that the *senorita* be sent to Earth with you? She is of your nation."

With an effort, Degnan brought his attention back to that problem. "She'll have questions to answer, I think—" He stopped short. "Yes, send her along."

ON THE SHORT trip to Earth, Degnan scarcely noticed the girl or anyone else; he was greedily wrapped up in studying a Los Angeles newspaper, borrowed from the lieutenant in command of the courier vessel.

He was somehow disappointed by his first real glimpse of Earth's reaction to the interplanetary war that was only nine days old. There were many columns of "war news" but very little news. A feature article on the interceptor barrage which made Earth a fortress, and which was claimed—it seemed to Degnan not very convincingly—to be far superior to that with which Venus had surrounded itself. On the front page in boldface type a noncommittal communique from the new Combined Fleet Headquarters, Somewhere on Earth. Elsewhere, articles that hinted nebulously at the plans for a tremendous offensive being perfected by the world's best military and scientific brains at that hidden base, whose location was secret lest the enemy concentrate some desperate, all-out thrust on it...

Degnan snorted, smelling a rat. He knew that there was no need to figure out an attack strategy now; the plans for offensive action against Ve-

nus under all conceivable circumstances had been ready and on file for years as a matter of simple precaution, ready to be put into effect at any moment.

Still scanning the paper, he did not notice that the messenger-boat had landed until a crewman touched his shoulder. As he rose, he saw that the port was already open and the girl had disappeared. It struck him suddenly that he had never learned her name; he scowled and told himself to forget it.

It was a sunny afternoon and the sky of Earth was blue. Outside Los Angeles Spaceport he halted on the sidewalk and blinked, almost overwhelmed by the actuality of swarming human life that went on under the shadow of Venusian war.

Gleaming traffic flowed swiftly by, with Los Angeles traffic's traditional disregard for life and limb. The people who crowded the streets in the sunlight wore holiday faces, filled with social gaiety or smug relaxation or petty clinging worries. Among them, the frequency of uniforms, soldiers and spacemen, showed that times were something more or less than normal. But not one of them looked toward the sky in either fear or defiance.

Beside the gateway was a poster, displaying a hideous and inaccurate painting of a Venusian, its prehensile paws upraised in an unnatural pouncing pose. The caption was screamingly funny. It said: EXTERMINATORS WANTED. ENLIST TODAY!

Degnan stared at it with a curious sense of distaste. There was such a vast difference between this cartoon bogey and the reality of forty million living monsters on Venus who planned and worked coolly, pur-

posefully, with all the power of their alien, total minds, to shatter and end the carefree world of man...

A MAN WAS standing at his elbow, thoughtfully watching him. Degnan turned deliberately, a chill question ready in his eyes; but that evaporated as he met a familiar face. "Jay Marlin!"

The other grinned easily. "That's right. They told me to shepherd the stray lamb back to headquarters. You look like you need an escort, too—sort of lost."

Degnan nodded slowly, fumbling for words. "I feel like a stranger here, somehow. I must have expected... oh, hell, I don't know."

Jay's smile grew quizzically sympathetic. "You must have been through the mill, Ralph. But that's why General Fleming is so anxious to see you. You're the only man who was on Venus when the war began and who got back to tell us about it."

A plain maroon sedan was waiting. Degnan sank into its cushions with a sigh of disbelief.

He said lamely, "I've not had time to get a report ready."

"You're to make it verbally to the General himself. I told you he was anxious."

Degnan was silent. It came to him like a dash of ice water that he could report exactly nothing on the period of time they would be most interested in. Did he detect, lurking behind Jay Marlin's unchanged friendliness, just the faintest note of watchful distrust? They would be justified in holding him in suspicion. He was forced to suspect himself, so long as that torturing twelve-day blank defied him, held its secrets though his hands clenched involuntarily and the

blood pounded in his ears with the effort to remember...

"Sorry," he said absently. "What'd you say?"

"I said," repeated Jay, "we're there."

THE LEATHER-BROWN face of General Fleming, district chief of NAMI, was covered by a crossing, branching and interlacing system of deep wrinkles, which, as the shrewd mind behind them chose, could be amiable, stern, persuasive, ferocious or impenetrable. The General wore his impenetrable look as he listened to Ralph Degnan's tale.

At last he said, "Is that all?"

"All I can remember," said Degnan steadily. "As I indicated—it's quite possible I've forgotten something important."

"Um, yes." The General switched off the recording machine that had been humming quietly on his desk, thus making the rest of the conversation private. "We'll come back to that." He leaned back with half-shut eyes that still watched Degnan narrowly. "The first part of your report, on the Venusian primitives, may come in handy eventually, but hardly now. Your findings are negative; we'd accomplish nothing by trying to stir up the Under Race against its masters, since it's too backward technologically to count at all in a modern war."

"Still," said Degnan, "they're people, in spite of their looks. The Over Race aren't."

The General gazed at him soberly. "To be perfectly frank, Colonel—in your expressed judgment of the Over Race I seem to hear a note of hysteria."

Degnan choked back quick resentment. He said in a carefully con-

trolled voice, "I think we're underestimating them. I'm not a defeatist. But their conviction of their own superiority—"

The General snorted; his wrinkles ferocious. "That's what I mean. You've let them get your goat. Convince you they can defeat us with occult mental powers, or some such rot!"

"Remember," said Degnan stonily, "they have total mentality. They think consciously, logically, with their entire brains, while we use only a small part of ours for that, and the rest is unconscious mind—emotional, rather than logical."

"That's why I think the fact that the Venusians deliberately began this war is—well, ominous. They're constitutionally incapable of fighting just because they're mad. They don't get mad. They've begun it because they think they can win. We outclass them in all ways of making war that we know about. So—they must be ready to make war in ways that we've never heard of." Degnan drew a deep breath, curiously relieved at having brought his own buried fears into the open in plain language.

"They haven't shown much sign of it so far. No Venusians ships, except the tub you were on, have come near our patrols for several days now. They've sent across a good many bombardment rockets—cheap imitations of ours, like their ships—but not a one has got through. Now, where's their terrible secret weapon?"

"I don't know. I do have an idea, though, about one thing they must be banking on. Our fleets were prepared long ago; why haven't they already blasted Venus?" The General was silent, and Degnan knew he had touched a live spot. "Maybe it's because our fleets are national, and

each of our sovereign 'United' Nations is holding back, for fear of losing its one or two or three battleships and being at the mercy of its Earthly neighbors when Venus is licked!"

THE GENERAL squinted at him, observed in a dangerously soft tone, "You're talking now, Colonel Degnan, about things that are out of your province and mine as well. Strategy is made by Combined Fleet Headquarters."

"I'm on the outside, but I can still think."

"Maybe," said the General with an odd grimace. He made his wrinkled visage stern. "Now I'll tell you about the Venusians' secret weapon. Though I shouldn't have to; you seem to be a casualty already."

Degnan merely stared at him. A moment before he had been hot with conviction; now he was cold, feeling fear contract about his heart again.

"We know what they've been trying to do," rasped Fleming, "and we're putting a stop to it. During the last twenty years, a lot of Terrestrials have been on Venus for shorter or longer periods. And off and on, especially in the last few years, we've been considerably irritated by their kidnaping our citizens—as you were kidnaped. Always the same pattern—grab one of our people, then release him after a while, with apologies but no explanations. And they must have got to a lot of humans without our ever knowing it.

"Now we know their aim was to work on the minds of as many Terrestrials as they could, which was probably several hundred. They're good at psychology and that sort of thing, including hypnosis; I'll grant they know more about that than we

do. And they were using hypnosis to turn those people into traitors—so many Venusian agents—back here on Earth.”

Degnan said, fighting against a wild sinking feeling, “You can’t hypnotize a man into betraying what he believes.”

“So the psychologists tell me,” admitted the General heavily. “I’m not saying your loyalty’s been subverted, Degnan. But they did get to a lot of people who weren’t very well-balanced to begin with. We’ve been rounding them up—everybody who’s ever been on Venus gets checked and double checked. And we’ve uncovered a lot of bad eggs already. They’ve even got an organization of sorts, centering right here in Los Angeles, since most of the ships went out to Venus from here. That’s one reason you were given an escort from the field.”

“In your case—you can see we’ll have to suspend you from active duty. You’ll be given an association-test before you leave this building; if its results are negative, you’ll be at liberty, but you’ll have to come back for detailed psychiatric examination and treatment if indicated.”

Degnan was pale under the swarthy complexion that not even sunless Venus had been able to blanch. He moistened his lips, said numbly, “I see.”

The General rose and extended his hand. “I’m glad you understand that we can’t take any chances. No hard feelings, then?”

“No, sir,” muttered Degnan, not knowing whether he lied or not.

HE WASN’T surprised when they let him leave after the association-test; he knew enough about such things to be sure that his unhesitat-

ing responses had been the right ones. Loyalty to one’s nation is evinced by the right automatic responses to certain key words, such as “liberty”, “king”, “fatherland”, “the proletariat”; and loyalty to the species, though a deeper, truer, more instinctive thing, can be measured in the same manner.

Whatever the Venusians had done to his mind—and they had obviously done something—hadn’t affected his inmost self. They might have blanked out some of his memories and left him with post-hypnotic suggestions to remember things that had never happened, but they couldn’t have indoctrinated him.

As he paused undecidedly in front of the NAMI building, a girl’s cool voice called, “Ralph!”

He looked up, and saw a vision of splendor—a smooth new sky-blue car, plastic top pushed back, parked by the curb in front of him, and Athalie Norton gazing at him from behind the wheel, a shadow of annoyance on her flower-pretty face that was framed by spun-gold hair.

“What’s the matter, Ralph?” she asked crisply. “Did General Fleming deafen you? Get in—you can explain on the way out to the house.”

He slid in mechanically beside her, without answering, which didn’t seem to bother her. She fed power to the gravity-thrust motor and shot the car expertly out into the traffic stream with a surge that would have spun the wheels of anything whose power was transmitted through the wheels. Degnan watched her, reflecting that Athalie did everything like that—surely, with a sort of determined violence. Her fragile blonde beauty was deceptive; behind that mask she always knew what she wanted and got it. Once upon a time she had decid-

ed she wanted Ralph Degnan.

"How," he asked, "did you know where I was?"

Athalie smiled secretly. "I have ways—or Father has."

Naturally, thought Degnan. Athalie's father was a big man, with the bigness of the corporation he controlled. North American Steel. One way or another, he had made an astronomical amount of money. And Athalie was her father's money's child.

He wasn't sure he was pleased to see her so soon. There were things he needed to work out alone.

"What did they want you for in such a hurry?"

"They wanted," said Degnan grimly, "to tell me I was canned."

She gave him a flashing sidelong glance. "How come?"

"As a psycho, practically. Since the Venusians picked me up, my memory has holes and kinks in it—so NAMI can't trust me any more."

The girl sighed lightly. "Well... that's good. You need a vacation after all those ghastly experiences. Poor Ralph! You can stay at our place and take a good long rest."

DEGNAN was startled by her reaction; then he remembered that his job had never meant anything to her but a minor irritation once the illusion of glamor it had had for her had worn thin. She would gladly have made a kept husband of him; he had sworn fiercely, privately, that she never would.

"Actually," he said carefully, "I'm suspended, indefinitely. That means until the war's over. But... I've got a nasty feeling there may not be any world after this war, Athalie."

She frowned daintily. "You talk like Father. Since the war started

he's gone crazy—acts like he thought he was twenty years younger, only he isn't. They requisitioned the *Azor* a week ago; so he offered to remodel it with his own money. And every time I go by our landing field, I have to see what they're doing to it—as if they couldn't fight the Venusians without spoiling that beautiful ship! I'm sick of hearing about the war. If you can't talk about anything else, Ralph darling, please shut up."

"Okay," said Degnan.

She looked at him longer this time, arching a delicate brow, and almost sideswiped a slower vehicle. "Have I offended you? I don't want to..." She had taken the roadway through Elysian Park, and now she turned the power switch to "Braking" and let the car roll to a stop on a small branching driveway behind a shielding screen of trees. Then she leaned back against the cushions, and her brisk wilful self-confidence seemed gone, she was suddenly younger, softer. She breathed, "It's been so long..."

Degnan wouldn't have been human if he could have disregarded that unveiled invitation.

But when she murmured dreamily, close to his ear, "This is real, Ralph. The real thing, and all the rest, all your silly worrying and fretting—cobwebs—" the soft words stabbed him like poisoned knives, and he drew away from her, with eyes grown suddenly cold and remote.

"I don't know, Athalie. I don't know whether you're as real as some of the things I've seen."

"What are you talking about?"

He tried to tell her, then, about the prison ship *Sheneb*, the triumphant monsters and the humans whose black nightmare there had ended

mercifully in a burst of atomic flame. She listened, uncomprehending, her nose wrinkling at last in disgust.

"That's all over. You're safe on Earth. Why not forget it?"

"I've forgotten too much already, I think. And I've got a feeling that remembering is important not just to me but to a lot of other people as well."

The scarlet pout of her lips was childish, but her eyes were a scornful woman's. "You think Earth won't defeat Venus without *your* help? I thought they told you your help wasn't wanted."

That stung; he snapped, "Nothing matters to you but your own selfishness, does it?"

He'd forgotten Athalie had a temper too. "You're the selfish one! You'd sacrifice me to some crackpot idea! Go on, spout about your patriotism or whatever it is you love more than you do me!" Once started, she didn't give him time for breath, let alone interruption, and her rage was self-fueling. "I hate you! Get out! Out of my car and out of my sight!"

Degnan had grown cooler as she grew furious. "All right," he said quietly. "I'm going."

BEFORE he was out the door, Athalie started the car with a jerk that all but sent him sprawling in the grass. He recovered his balance and watched the sky-blue machine whip out of sight beyond a tree-masked curve, as if racing to a date with a smashup.

Degnan shook his head ruefully and turned away, back toward the main road and the border of the park.

This wasn't their first quarrel, but he had a strong feeling that it might be the last. It was too bad about

Athalie, because it really wasn't her fault. She hadn't changed; but Degnan knew objectively that he had, since thirty hours aboard the *Sheneb* and since twelve days of—what?—on Venus.

The blank was still there. It must be that out of it crept the uncanny sense of urgency that was stronger and stronger upon him. Of catastrophe, vast and formless, impending unless—or if?—he, and no one else, did something he couldn't quite remember.

As he plodded along the roadside, the scene with Athalie retreated to the back of his mind. Nevertheless, when the car eased to a stop beside him, he thought for a moment it was she, come back.

Then he saw that this car was different. An older model, black, ill-kept, its top almost opaque with dirt and scratches. It had the distinctive personality that old cars acquire, and it was somehow familiar.

But its driver was nobody Degnan had seen before. An oldish man, face marked by hard living like his machine's finish, he leaned toward Degnan, thumb still on the button that had opened the door. "Going downtown? Climb in and save your feet."

DEGNAN got in, muttering thanks. As the car rolled leisurely ahead down the curving parkway, his brain clicked with sudden, belated recognition. This same battered machine had been behind them all the way out here, following with a closeness and tenacity that could hardly have been accidental—that obviously hadn't been.

He didn't feel alarmed, but he did know a lively curiosity. He tensed invisibly, waiting for the move that must come.

"Ever been on Venus, pal?"

Ah-ha, said Degnan to himself, and aloud, "You're psychic, huh?"

"Nah," said the driver. "You just got the look. I was there once, myself."

Check, thought Degnan.

"Yeah," said the other man. "I was a spaceman once, believe it or not. Back before gravities, too, when you sweat out most of every trip in free fall. I been to Venus and Mars and all them places out there. Advancing the cause of Man's Glorious Empire—you know. Now I'm retired, on a pension a bedbug couldn't live on." He spat sideways, out the window. "A guy gets a raw deal when they got no more use for him. Maybe you know something about that, yourself."

"I'm thinking," said Degnan coldly, "that you know more about me than you're letting on."

The man laughed shortly. "Okay. So you know all about me, and I know all about you, Mr. Degnan. Why not? We're two of a kind." Getting no answer, he went on rapidly, "We've got a lousy deal, and we know the system's rotten. Don't we? It all looks fine—" He gestured jerkily out the windows: they were back on a business street now, where even under the sinking sun the storefronts, the glittering beetle-cars, the walking people were luminous with life and color. "All pretty things and fun—but underneath it's rotten, shot full of holes. People, crawling all over the world—there's too many of them, and they're stupid. We know it can't last. Don't we?"

"You mean Venus is going to win the war?"

The other flashed a scared, uncertain glance at him; crawling though the car was now through the traffic,

his driving began to make Degnan nervous. "What do you think?"

"I'm no prophet. But I know this," said Degnan bluntly, "that you're human—but the thing that's talking out of you has bug eyes and claws for hands, and breathes formaldehyde."

He saw the man's hands cramp on the wheel; a moment later, as if in instinctive flight, they swerved the car into a sheltering side street. The voice held a hysterical note that was a fusion of pleading and threat: "I'm giving it to you straight. You're one of us. They got part of you, too, back there. They'll never give it back, that part of us, until they win. So they've got to win!" The last words were a whine of fear.

Degnan ruthlessly suppressed the jelly-like quivering of a kindred fear inside him, and sank his voice to an icy tone of menace. "All right, I've heard enough. I'm an Intelligence agent, mister. Drive to NAMI headquarters. Don't try anything; I've got a gun."

That was a bad bluff, he realized as the other snapped on the brake, jerking them forward, and twisted, reaching, and snarling, "The hell you have!"

DEGNAN lunged across the seat; one flat hand caught the fellow under the chin and slammed his head back against the plastic cowl, the other chopped down with split-second timing on his wrist. Degnan scooped the pistol up and leveled it.

"Leastways, I've got a gun now," he amended with a tight grin. He felt almost grateful to the Venusians' slave for providing a splurge of violence to snap him out of his fruitless mental grubblings. And a new idea had struck him; he added, "But I

don't know whether it's really worth while running you in. The likes of you'll never damage the war effort much... Tell you what, rat. I'll turn you loose, if you explain about that last line you were handing me."

"What—line?" the man muttered dizzily.

"About the Venusians keeping part of you."

The other tried to look defiantly jeering. "It's not just me. It's you too. They've got your soul on Venus, and you'll never get it back unless you help them win!"

Degnan hesitated, then decided against further questioning. This bird evidently knew nothing, apart from what the Over Race for their own purposes had planted inside his skull.

He pronged open the door and thrust his hand with the gun into a pocket. "Okay, brother—you can go tell the other zombies to scratch my name off their list."

He gazed after the swiftly receding car with a grim smile. That injunction wouldn't be obeyed, he was sure—if he didn't meet that one again, there would be more of the same kind looking for him. Which meant, he hoped, a chance to learn more about the thing that most vitally interested him now.

Without much difficulty, he got his bearings and caught a bus for a part of town he knew well, close to the Municipal Spaceport. His plans were simple: he'd rent a room—since he had to stay in Los Angeles anyway, waiting for instructions from headquarters—lie low, and wait for trouble to come to him.

En route, he went over what he'd learned. It wasn't much. General Fleming had been right; there were Venusian agents, human ones, on

Earth. And Degnan knew the outlines of one type of induced delusion that the Over Race used to bend minds to their will.

But what had they used on him?

The business of captive souls, he snorted at. But the fact remained that he had lost, if not his soul, twelve days on Venus... Perhaps a psychiatrist would be able to straighten the tangled threads and ravel out his memories, when they got round to his case. But he sensed unreasoningly that something was going to happen before then, something terrible and irreversible, something that he alone must prevent...

IT WAS almost midnight when he finally found a lodging, for the city was overcrowded with the soldiers of the Fleet. The streets were full of them too, even at that late hour, wandering in groups and with girls, carefree as boys on an outing. Earth had known no war in their memory or in their fathers', and their brief military training had given them scant sense of what it might mean.

Degnan went to bed in a fog of depression compounded of his sense of impending disaster, memory of the quarrel with Athalie, and sheer physical weariness.

When he woke at two p.m. the last cause, at least, had been removed, and he felt more equal to the struggle—if only he knew what he was struggling against.

As he ate afternoon breakfast in a second-rate, uniform packed restaurant, his attention was snared by the modulated tones of a news commentator, rolling from the place's wide-open radio:

"Monitors on the Moon report that Radio Venus has broadcast something like an ultimatum to Earth. Receivers

here didn't pick it up, of course, because of the all-wave scrambling by our defense barrage. But I'm authorized to pass on some of the juicier parts; they may give you a laugh, particularly when you remember the news we got a few hours ago—about how the *Gharukh*, the one first-class battleship Venus had under the Armament Limitation Treaty, was caught off base and blasted out of space by the North American battleship *Alaska* and the Chinese *Yang Tse*.

"But now the high spots of the Venusian pronunciamento. The Over Race announces as its war aims the extermination of humanity and conversion of Earth, according to a prepared 'planetary engineering blueprint', into a Venus-type world, with a cloud blanket and formaldehyde-carbon-dioxide atmosphere.

"The alternative to unconditional surrender—destruction by a mysterious 'final weapon', which is ready to strike at any moment, but which the Venusians hesitate to use, they explain, because it might damage the planet Earth itself and put difficulties in the way of their conversion plan. So they call on us to surrender, offering as bait the promise that a 'chosen few' of the human race will be spared and allowed to migrate to Mars—a suitable home for the cold-blooded poison-breathers who now inhabit Earth'.

"Surely no more evidence is needed that the war lords of Venus are completely out of touch with reality..."

Somebody in the cafe did laugh at that crack. But Degnan sat staring at the radio, and the glitter of its chromium recalled the gleam of great inhuman eyes, alive with intelligence and a coolly calculating consciousness of power.

Disgust crystallized in him, for the shallow humans who scoffed at the Venusians because they had never conquered space and had shamelessly borrowed and stolen the achievements of Earth science in that field. But the scoffers did not realize that Venus had a science of its own. Their science was not so much quantitatively as qualitatively different from Earth's, and its most basic tenets seemed sheer nonsense to an Earthly mind... The Over Race had liberated atomic energy, for example, before the coming of the Earthmen; but no human scientist had ever fathomed the workings of a Venusian atomic engine. They seemed to regard the subatomic particles as possessed in some fashion of will and purpose, and they coaxed atoms apart with gentle persuasion instead of smashing projectiles.

That much Degnan knew—and he was very far from laughing at the Venusian ultimatum.

He realized with a chill start how close his thinking was coming to the propaganda line he had heard yesterday evening, about the decadence and stupidity of mankind. Had he too soaked up some of that mental virus? And what touchstone would serve to distinguish the ideas native to your mind from those deftly inset by a monstrous psychologist?

WHEN HE got back to his room, the green light on the phone recorder was aglow. From headquarters, a summons to come in for further examination, he thought with an odd stirring of rebellion, and flipped on the speaker.

A woman's voice, hauntingly known to him. "Colonel Degnan—this is Margaret Lusk, who was with you on the *Sheneb*."

"I have to warn you. Something

is about to happen—will begin happening very soon, that will be tremendously important to you and through you to—everybody. You must be ready.”

The voice changed, became somehow more emotional, more human, and still more familiar. “If you’ll meet me this evening at seven, in front of the City Museum—maybe I can tell you something more. I can’t promise, because I don’t know how I know what I said before... But please come. You’ve got to come!”

That was all. The recorder hummed unnoticed for a time; finally Degnan spun it back and ran the message off again.

Whatever the quirk in his head was—delusion, premonition—he wasn’t alone with it. He had company, and the knowledge was a straw to cling to.

Warmly, though he thought impersonally, he remembered the dark-haired girl called Margaret Lusk—ridiculous that he hadn’t learned her name before, after all they’d been through together. He felt a queer bond between himself and her, born of a few long, long minutes aboard the *Sheneb*; and he found himself, half-consciously, comparing his memory of her face, ravaged by suffering and terror, with his last glimpse of Athalie—blonde beauty marred by passion, her furious blindness to everything but her own desires. The comparison was in Margaret Lusk’s favor.

Above all, though—she might hold the answer, or a part-answer, to the question that was becoming his nightmare.

BEFORE seven o’clock he was marching restlessly up and down in the park grounds before the

Museum. In the warm gathering dusk, there were other strollers otherwise preoccupied. Couples arm in arm, walking or sitting on the benches and talking and laughing softly while darkness came over the city.

In the west, above the trees, a bright star shone before the rest—Venus as evening star. The people in the park saw it, but their gayety was not damped by it.

As the night came nearer, Venus grew brighter still and the other stars came out, and high up among them brief sparks of light streaked swiftly like the burning pebbles of a meteor shower, and died redly or flared out of existence in soundlessly brilliant explosions. They came as often as one to the minute, in every part of the sky, and Degnan knew what they were—bombardment rockets from Venus approaching Earth at five hundred or a thousand miles a second, caught and wiped out by the interceptor barrage.

Ahead of him a girl squealed with a tingling thrill of fright and snuggled against the soldier with her, as they saw one flash out brighter than the rest.

“That was a near one,” said the soldier gruffly. “Must not have stopped it more than two, three hundred miles up. But,” he swelled his chest a little “we’re safe. Not a one’s got through, and not a one’s going to.”

The girl murmured something admiring.

Margaret Lusk was late showing up. Degnan was beginning to wonder if she’d stood him up, or if there had been some mistake in time or place. And then he glimpsed her at the other end of the tree-lined walk he had been pacing, turned and hurried toward her.

As he came near he saw that it was really she, trim and tidy as he had not seen her before, her dark hair braided neatly about her head. She saw him too, smiled quickly and started to call to him...

A huge and blazing star glided clear across the sky, drenching the Museum's grounds and the whole city in an unholy bath of reddish light. Far to the eastward it touched the Earth, and a second later a mountain of searingly radiant vapor began rising there, boiling higher and higher and turning night to day even as the fire-trail faded.

By that glare, Degnan saw the girl's pale face and wide eyes looking like holes burned in a blanket. He said idiotically, "We're all right. The city wasn't hit."

"It's happened!" she gasped, and he couldn't tell whether her tone was terror or ecstasy. She stood stiffly beside him but apart, gazing at the rising pillar of fire.

Degnan's ability to think came back; he snapped, "Better get down. Flat on the ground. The shock-wave'll be here before long."

But it was minutes before the ground heaved and shuddered with earthquake. On the heels of the earth-wave came the air-wave, a hurricane in violence, and in its midst the lights in the Museum facade, which had so far burned steadily, went out as something happened to Los Angeles' central power plant. Screams rose then from among the people scattered in the park.

THOUGH Degnan didn't know it then, he had seen the arrival of the first of the hyperspace projectiles, which landed fifty miles east of Los Angeles. The manner of its coming was this:

The great robot brain in Denver, which coordinated the defense bar-

rage over all North America and parts of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, registered, routinewise, the approach of a Venusian missile aimed at the West Coast. Nothing unusual; a torpedo of normal size, traveling at the somewhat low velocity of five hundred miles per second. In routine fashion, also, the calculator transmitted the information to its human watchers at the same time that it made the necessary computations and sent out the necessary orders to subsidiary units of the interception network. No special alarm was sounded, since it was a simple piece of work to encompass the projectile's destruction.

To do that, the robot brain in essence set up within its own structure the rocket's flight in space and physically possible evasive maneuvers, correlated with the positions of the mines strewn lavishly in orbits about the Earth. It sent out the signals to set those mines in motion that would carry them across all possible paths of the missile, with their blast guns, their charges of atomic explosive and their seeking, thinking controls.

Within the brain the paths converged, met, and the rocket was destroyed.

But in the reality of space, ten thousand miles out—a detector in the Venusian projectile tripped a switch at the first contact with Earth radar, and threw it into hyperspace drive. And it never reached any of the predicted positions, never encountered the searching beams or the shattering explosions.

The robot brain knew that within a fraction of a second. It rang the alarm, this time, and simultaneously sent the inner belt of mines into action.

By now men were incredulously

watching the instruments that registered the hyperspace projectile's flight—or tried to register it; the wild shifting of the needles, the crazy fluctuation of the graphs could not be translated into any meaningful space-time coordinates.

While they stared, helpless, the embattled calculator used its last resort; hundreds of interception rockets, tiny, viciously potent proximity-fused things, left their launching sites and climbed at a hundred thousand gravities' acceleration to meet the enemy.

It evaded them, too, still flying its impossible course, and fell not far from San Bernardino, which together with neighboring Riverside and other towns and villages around, vanished that instant from the face of the Earth. Like most such weapons, the hyperspace projectile bore no explosive warhead; but it struck at five hundred miles a second. It blasted a crater a mile across, and the shock waves from it did much damage in San Diego.

By that time the second one, which landed on Calcutta and killed two million people, was coming in toward the Asiatic sector.

DARKNESS, pallidly relieved by the rising moon, lay with strange silence on the great city. Somewhere, far off, sirens sobbed of disaster.

The girl stood facing Ralph Degan, her back against a tree-trunk in a vaguely defensive pose. He could not read her face, a white blur in the shadow.

He commanded again, "Think! What more do you know?"

"I don't know," said Margaret Lusk. "I had to send you that message, that's all. Something told me to call you—but not about meeting you here. That was my idea."

"I can guess what 'something' was," growled Degan. He wanted to question her ruthlessly and to the point, but he was finding it hard to concentrate. Something was churning in his mind, struggling toward the light like a formless monster heaving itself to the surface of a swamp. Since the projectile's fall he had felt that—the sense of being about to remember something once known but forgotten.

His outward senses seemed to strain sympathetically toward hyperacuteness. He thought he heard rustlings round about, a stealthy scuffling of feet in the park shrubbery...

An idea struck him with shocking force. He demanded, "Say! How'd you know where to call me? I only found that room late last night!"

She made no reply, but he heard the quick, suspicious intake of breath.

"Answer me!"

Then the slight sounds he had heard and half-dismissed materialized into a rush of pounding feet from every side at once. Instinctively he ducked and spun around. Someone tackled him round the waist and hung on, and other hands were laid on him. His fists lashed out at indistinct figures, and smote air as often as flesh and bone; he lunged furiously, and had a moment's hope of breaking free before something blunt and hard descended stunningly on his head.

The blow made the joints of his skull creak like rusty hinges, and for a while time stood still. When he began to struggle out of the fog, there was a while when he only wanted to crawl back under it and leave his headache outside.

He grew aware that he was sitting propped up, and the feel of

the cushioned seat and its slight movements told him he was in a car. Someone was on each side of him. He thought: I'm getting lots of free rides. Then he realized that this was a Ride in the worst sense of the word.

A BRASSY voice was speaking—Degnan couldn't see, because something like a sack was pulled smotheringly over his face, but he formed an instant dislike for the speaker—“I say get rid of him. Hell! If I'd hit him a little harder, there wouldn't be any argument.”

“Nah,” said a whining voice that he remembered sharply, from yesterday evening, “you couldn't hit that hard, Clark. His head's so thick, even *they* couldn't pound anything into it.”

“Maybe I'll show you if I could,” said Clark viciously. “Now, what's wrong with stopping right here and kicking him off a pier? We got enough troubles without him...”

“Will you listen to me?” broke in a voice that chilled Degnan to the bone, for it was the voice of Margaret Lusk. “I tell you, he knows something. He has a command. Or why would I have been told to send him a message?”

Degnan thought dully: Slaves of Venus, all of them. I was going to lead them on and find out what they know about this hypnotic business—so I walked straight into a baited trap. And now I'm supposed to know something they don't!

What, exactly, was he supposed to know?... Oh, yes. Sure. That's right.

He remembered, but not the where and how of his coming to know what he did. It fitted somewhere in that twelve-day blank that he still couldn't fill in consecutively... It was like in the stories

where a crack on the head cures the hero's amnesia; but he knew it wasn't that simple.

Clear to him were principles and details of the construction and operation of the Venusians' new weapon, the hyperspace projectile, and of the hyperspace drive in general—a startlingly simple modification, simple at least to Venusian minds, of the Earth-invented gravitics. It was as plain as if someone had just been explaining it all to him, even the gravitic principles he'd been hazy on before.

The revelation shocked him so that he moved convulsively, and discovered that his wrists were lashed together.

“He's coming to life,” announced still another voice beside him.

The girl went on unheeding: “It's obvious *they* have a purpose in this, and we'd be crazy if we disregarded it. They cast him adrift with me in the *Sheneb's* life rocket, close to Earth—and I think he was the one they wanted to be sure got here, and I was just ballast. We've got to wait and see.”

“Okay, okay,” grumbled the man called Clark. “But I think we're cutting our throats.”

Degnan hadn't stirred again; he was slumped between his captors, prey momentarily to a paralyzing horror.

He could imagine what was happening now all over Earth—wherever the Venusians chose to aim their new unstoppable projectiles. Irresistible, yet real and deadly, because the concept of hyperspace as an *otherwhere*, wholly out of touch with here and now, was false; rather, it was an *otherhow*. The great calculators of the Earth's defense centers, and the lesser brains of the barrage, could compute trajectories and probabilities in normal space-

time, but the course of a hyper-space missile was utterly unpredictable by normal mathematics. Interception of one of them would be pure lucky accident.

THE CAR stopped. Still blinded, he was pushed roughly out. Even with a hard muzzle thrusting into his back, he had to draw tight rein on the impulse to break away and make a dash for freedom.

He tripped over low steps, heard a door open and smelled close indoor air. The gun prodded him forward a short distance, then Clark's voice behind him ordered, "Turn left."

Degnan sensed that the room was a small one even before someone jerked off the blinder. He found himself facing a beefy redfaced man who stood negligently pointing a heavy gun. Degnan's eyes widened slightly; the gun was a flame pistol, actually a compact, pocket-sized atomic blast, strictly forbidden to civilians.

The room was sparsely furnished with a couple of chairs, a table, and a studio couch; dust of neglect on everything. The single window was shuttered, the ceiling light on, which must mean the power had come back.

Behind Clark's thick figure, Degnan saw the slight one of Margaret Lusk, flanked by his insinuating acquaintance of yesterday and another man, a hollow-eyed, unshaven specimen. The girl's dark gaze rested on Degnan with speculation and, he thought, a touch of compassion.

Clark wagged the flame pistol. "Okay, fellow. She says you've got a command. What is it?"

Degnan was stonily silent. The truth wouldn't do him any good, and he didn't know enough to risk making up a story. If he could learn a

little more about what went on—

Clark scowled. "If we're going to find out anything from this dummy, maybe I'd better persuade him to talk."

"You don't really think that would work?" said the girl coldly.

"Never know what a guy'll take until you try him."

"You make me sick," she said, and Degnan had to marvel despite himself at her air of cool superiority. "I don't know why you had to go after him in the first place. Whatever command he carries with him will be set to function in its own time and way, though he may not know what it is himself—and we may be interfering with the Over Race's plans."

Clark's red face grew shades paler; he backed away from the prisoner, the flame gun jittering in his grip in a way that set Degnan's teeth on edge.

"But we can't let him go," mumbled the big man. "Can we?"

The girl shrugged. "No. But we can keep him here, and try to find out—in an intelligent way—what he's supposed to do."

"How?"

She bit her lip, frowning faintly. Her gaze traveled searchingly over Degnan's set face, as if trying to read his thoughts. If she could have done so, she wouldn't have found them pleasant; he was nursing the bittersweet thought of getting his hands on her throat. At the moment, it seemed to him that he hated the girl more than the others, as if her betrayal of humanity had wounded him personally and deeply...

She said with decision, "We'll have to try hypnosis."

The other slaves of Venus stared. Clark grunted suspiciously, "Maybe you know how to do that?"

MARGARET LUSK nodded confidently. "It's the only way to find out what's in a person's subconscious mind—and that's where the Over Race plant their commands." She picked up a handbag from the table and rummaged in it, came out with something that flashed—a small mirror; she explained, "It's not hard. You fix their attention with something bright, and... Well, just keep quiet and I'll show you."

She moved to the studio couch and spent a minute or so carefully adjusting its cushions, then beckoned Degnan to sit down. He obeyed silently, watching her with gathering puzzlement. "That's it. Now lean back. Way back. Relax."

There was an odd tense urgency in her low voice—scarcely the soothing note the hypnotist uses. And the whole show was unutterably phony. Degnan was no expert on hypnotic technique, but he was familiar enough with it to realize that Margaret knew a good deal less than he... Deliberately he kept his expression impassive, leaned back obediently against the cushions, hands still bound behind him.

She was waving the hand-mirror slowly to and fro in front of his eyes, murmuring, "Relax. Sleep. Go to sleep..." She couldn't really imagine that hocus-pocus would work. It might conceivably have had an effect on a very cooperative subject; but anybody knew that to put an unwilling victim under you needed drugs or other drastic aids. Then he noticed from the corner of his eye that the spot of light reflected from the little mirror was dancing erratically on the wall; the hand that held it was trembling.

The others were taken in, though. They watched open-mouthed, with something of superstitious awe—ex-

cept Clark, maybe; the big man's eyes were narrowed as they rested on the girl. But even he had dropped the heavy flame gun into his jacket pocket.

Margaret's dark eyes held Degnan's, and their bright intense gaze mirrored—pleading? "Go to sleep. You're sinking—down, down—deep into the cushions—"

Degnan's bound hands writhed behind him, while with all his control he strove to remain outwardly immobile. He managed to keep from moving, even when a sharp pain stabbed one of those searching hands. He fumbled further, got hold of the penknife that had been hidden just under the edge of the cushion at his back. It was a little thing, but razor-keen. With infinite care he began working it between his wrists and the thin, tough cord that held them.

Clark scowled darkly and came forward, hulking and purposeful; he grasped Margaret's arm, and Degnan saw her wince. "You're getting nowhere fast," he growled. "I've seen hypnotism acts, and that's not the way—"

She whirled on him in a fury that must have been real. "Now you've done it. I'll have to start over—"

"I don't know." Clark didn't let loose of the girl. "I'm beginning to wonder just what the hell you're up to."

THERE WOULDN'T be a better chance. Degnan came to his feet in a rush whose impetus was behind the long straight punch he aimed at a point below the big man's ear.

Clark had time to start turning his head, and caught it glancingly on the side of the jaw, but it sent him reeling against the wall. And Degnan, without ever stopping mov-

ing, had scooped up a chair and clubbed it down on the fellow who had tried to convert him the day before.

The hollow-eyed one was backing to the far end of the room and tugging out a pistol. Degnan sent the chair rocketing at him with the speed and unavoidability of an artillery shell, and swung around to face Clark, who had come dizzily erect and was clawing at his coat pocket. Degnan tackled him and they crashed to the floor together; Degnan applied the ju-jitsu methods that were part of his NAMI training, and an instant later the flame gun was in his hand.

As he scrambled clear of the groaning Clark, he heard Margaret's scream blend with a crash of glass. The hollow-eyed man was backed against the further wall with an automatic in his hand, and he had just dodged a thrown table lamp. Without hesitation and almost without aiming, Degnan pulled the trigger.

The concussion was almost stunning in the little room. The air filled chokingly with smoke, and through it flames climbed with a crackling roar, blanketing one end of the room and already blocking the doorway. Degnan snatched up the other chair, found Margaret with his eyes. He shouted, "The window!" and drove the chair—luckily it was a metal-framed one—through glass and shutters. Instantly the fire whipped toward the vent created. Degnan caught Margaret's hand; he shouldered his way through the window, breaking out the remains of the pane, and drew the girl after him.

The night air was cool and sweet. Behind, the house was burning like a torch; some not too scrupulous builder must have used inflam-

mable plastics in it. "Make sure your clothes haven't caught," said Degnan breathlessly, "and come on!" He gestured toward the back, where a weed-grown garden seemed to lead to an alley.

"Wait!" cried Margaret. "Maxon's car's out front."

"That's ri— No; we haven't got the key."

He saw her smile in the glare of the fire. "I have it. I took it off him while you were fighting the others."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

THEY raced round to the front of the burning house. As yet, the noise and blaze didn't seem to have attracted anyone; the nearest dwellings were lightless—perhaps many people had fled the city or taken to their cellars in fear of the hyper-space bombardment, and the police and perhaps the fire department too would be having their hands full tonight.

As he set the car in motion, Degnan said quietly, "Thanks, Margaret. I hope you'll live to know how much this means."

She didn't look at him or answer. Degnan drove slowly for a little while, to avoid being reported fleeing from the scene of the fire; he touched the button that slid back the top of the car, and glanced at the night sky. Overhead, the stars were lost in a murky darkness in which intermittent lightning flickered, weirdly soundless, and once or twice there were long streaks of fire and far thunder. With prescient certainty, Degnan knew that Earth could not long endure the punishment Venus was giving her now... His face grew hard with determination.

He turned onto one of the arterial highways, heading toward the center of the city, and increased speed

as much as he dared, until the old car's drive unit whined protest into the whistle of wind.

Margaret said abruptly, "I want you to know—I didn't lead them to you on purpose. They knew where you were, anyway—it was Clark that gave me your address."

Degnan's mouth tightened; he didn't take his eyes off the road. "I still don't get the whole picture. What about these 'commands' of yours?"

This time her gaze was steady and fearless upon him. "It was horrible. I just didn't seem to care. Everything was ugly and useless, and I hated everybody and myself most of all... It wasn't hearing voices or anything like that. I just knew what I had to do, and all the time I knew too that something a long way off was pulling the strings and making me do it... Then, when they slugged you, there in the park, something seemed to go 'pop', and I knew it had lost control."

"For keeps?"

She held her head high, beautiful in a defiance aimed not at Degnan but at the monstrous thing in her memory. "Sometimes I can feel it trying to creep back like a snake; crawling, trying to wrap itself around me..." She shivered. "But I can brush it away. I'm myself now, and I'm going on being myself."

Degnan was silent, wondering: posthypnotic suggestions, then? Her telepathic sensitivity must be way up there, over a hundred on the Bjornsson scale... His own sensitivity was low, he knew, and he hadn't felt anything like that. In his case there were only memory gaps and memories that weren't real. For the first time it occurred to him that his knowledge of the hyperspace principle might be one of those—but he couldn't believe that;

the knowledge was too complete, too logically coherent.

"How'd you come to get mixed up with that gang?"

"I wandered away from the spaceport—I didn't know where I was going. Somebody was following me, I think—" Degnan nodded, as if to say "naturally"—"then I met Clark, and he showed me how to lose them, and took me to that house where the others were. They told me I'd left my soul on Venus, and it was true, then. Later on they seemed to be afraid of me, because I knew things they didn't..." She paused, passing a hand across her eyes.

INWARDLY, Degnan cursed the Over Race's science. But outwardly he smiled and said, "You're out from under now. They can make it stick with minds that are off balance already, but they guessed wrong about us."

She gave him a queer, scared look. "I'm free now. But I'm not so sure about you."

"Eh?"

"I told those men I thought you had a command from Venus. I'm still not sure it isn't true."

"If so," said Degnan harshly, "something's gone wrong with their chain of command. They're due for a shock! But if you thought that, why'd you help me get away?"

Margaret's face was in shadow as they passed between lightless rows of houses. "I'm not sure," she said candidly. "I like you, Degnan, and I wanted to help you—but I have a funny impersonal sort of feeling about you, too. As if—you were the most important man in the world."

Degnan smiled tautly. "There your feelings are on the right track. I am."

"What do you mean?"

"That thing that landed east of here tonight—and others like it must be hitting Earth every few minutes. I know what they are and how to stop them, and I've got to make what I know count in time. That's why we're on the way to NAMI headquarters now."

"Oh," was all she said.

He had once more to admire her control. There on the *Sheneb* he had thought her hysterical; actually she had been sapped by the mental poison the Venusians had administered. Now she was whole again and strong.

"I'm not taking you there," he assured her. "Stop off anywhere you like."

She didn't brighten. "I've nowhere to go; my brother was my only relative," she said tonelessly, and he wondered if she knew the prison ship had been destroyed. "And if any of those men got out of the fire back there—they and the others like them will be after me."

Degnan hesitated momentarily. "Now's not a good time to turn yourself in. Everybody'll be scared halfwitted by what's happening and you might get some rough handling. I'm not looking forward to an easy time myself." He came to a quick, illogical decision, assuring himself that what he, and the whole world, owed this girl outweighed the minutes that would be lost. "I've got a room rented for a week in advance and a feeling I won't be using it. There's automatic service; if you don't go out, nobody's likely to even know you're there for a few days, anyway. And when this is over, I'll see you again."

He knew where he was now, and picked a turnoff from the highway without hesitation. In front of the hotel, he pressed the key and some folded bills into her hand,

then gave her the flame gun he had taken from Clark, and advised curtly: "If the police find you—better give yourself up and hope for the best. But if your ex-playmates come around—give them fair warning, then push off the safety, like this, and let fly. It'll blow the side out of the apartment but don't let that stop you. You ought to be all right if nothing hits Los Angeles—which it won't, if I get through in time."

On impulse he bent to kiss her goodbye. The kiss lasted longer than it was meant to, with the race for the world's life still ahead.

GENERAL Fleming was restlessly on his feet, pacing aimlessly back and forth as if his roomy office had become a prison cell. The shriveled mask of his face no longer hid the very real fear and uncertainty behind it.

A redeyed and unkempt Ralph Degnan sprawled in the General's chair and wished the General would stop talking so he could catch a moment's sleep before the flier was ready. It had been a grinding session in the small hours with the handful of mathematicians and engineers he had finally persuaded them to call in—those men, who had been working without sleep on the problem of the hyperspace projectiles, had been at first wearily impatient, not believing, then at the last they had been wide-awake, firing questions at him faster than he could give the answers that were already clear in his mind.

Fleming said abruptly, "I've had our defense potential concentrated over Los Angeles as long as you're still here. Once you get to Combined Fleet Headquarters, you'll be out of danger—about the only place on Earth they still can't touch. It's been more than six hours now since

they sent over any of those damn things, but no telling when it will start again. God, how I'd like to think they'd used up their supply... Maybe those devils are just getting something new ready. We stopped over half of them during the last hour's bombardment, and deflected most of the rest. But we've fired three months' ammunition in four and a half hours. Our production can't begin to fill the gap. You've got to be right!"

Degnan said nothing. General Fleming worried on: "I can't understand why human operators, working by guess, can stop them oftener than the machines."

"The calculators are logical," said Degnan. "And so is the path of a body in hyperspace. But it's a different logic. That's all 'hyperspace' means—a different set of rules from those that apply to normal space and energy and matter, the rules man's been learning and building machines by for thousands of years. Our robot brains work according to those rules, so they can't determine the trajectory of a hyperspace projectile."

The General shook his head bewilderedly.

"Our physics has been devoted to determining the characteristics of space, which to the Venusian psycho-physicists means the behavior habits of energy and matter," explained Degnan wearily. "They found that other behavior patterns are possible. The difference is a question of energy levels. When a projectile changes to hyperspace drive, it loses about one kilogram of mass, which means enough energy to shake a planet. That's related to the variation in limiting velocities—incidentally, we can use this principle to travel faster than light, or the Venusians can, if—" He stopped.

The General frowned, grasped at a reality he could understand. "Colonel Degnan—I think I can admit now that you were right about the reason for delay in our offensive."

Degnan smiled faintly. "The big powers were afraid their handsome warships would get dented?"

"Not any more, by heaven! Last word from CFHQ says the delegates took just one quarter of an hour to reach a unanimous decision after the second projectile landed. All fleets made fully available. The offensive is being mounted now—"

A phone on the General's desk buzzed. He snatched it up, listening for a moment without answering, and turned on Degnan with the receiver in his hand. "On your way! Your clearance has come through and the flier will be ready by the time you're on the field!"

DEGNAN'S memory preserved in photographic, nightmarish detail one glimpse of Los Angeles Spaceport as he skirted the field with his guards.

Far out beyond the girdling fence, four great black warships loomed ready for takeoff and rendezvous with the gathering fleets. Above them the sky was turbulent, murkily luminous; Earth was slowly veiling her face in the smoke and dust of her own destruction, the reek of shattered cities and ruined countrysides.

Between the fence and the field itself, under a glare of floodlights, seethed a mass of people, men and women almost equally mixed. They were the same people Degnan had seen in the streets and parks of the city, walking by twos and laughing unafraid in their security. Now, a confused crying rose over them, a voice of tears and lamentation. Women

en clung to their men, summoned this hour to duty, and wept and would not let them go to space and the deadly ships and the horror of airless or flaming death millions of miles from anything. And the men—were leaving wives and sweethearts on a world grown perhaps less safe than the gun-decks of a warship.

Along the fence ranged stiffly a line of robot marines, armored bodies gleaming coldly under the lights, waiting mindlessly for orders from the mustached officer who stood beside them and watched the scene with an air of bleak dissatisfaction.

As Degnan and the two Intelligence agents with him hurried past, the officer turned his back on the crowd. Drops of sweat glistened on his expressionless face as he snapped an order to the motionless machines. The line of seven-foot robots pivoted with inhuman precision and moved on the swarm of humans, against and among them. Their steel arms flashed and thrust, separating those who must go from those who stayed behind, with the efficiency of a mechanical sorter...

One of the men with Degnan muttered something under his breath. The other said, "They ought to stop that. They shouldn't let those women come this far: they go crazy when they see the ships. It's bad for morale."

"Oh, dry up!" said the other.

Degnan said nothing. His dark face was rock-hard as he led them both across the field toward the flier that waited, dwarfed by the vastness of the interplanetary cruisers.

One of his escorts—the one who had said, "Oh, dry up!"—went aboard with him, the other returned to report that they'd got him safely that far.

GLANCING out through the heavy glass of a window, Degnan became aware that, above the artificial lights of the field, the sky was beginning to flush with rose and delicate violet. Not a minute later, when the flier was many miles above the Earth and racing westward, that had become a red and murky dawn, the dust of battle diffusing sunlight and turning itself into the likeness of smoke from hell's furnaces.

Westward, out over the Pacific. Degnan turned to the man beside him, "Where we headed? Asia?"

The agent shrugged; Degnan guessed that he honestly didn't know. Combined Fleet Headquarters was the secret of secrets—Earth's hidden nerve center, housing the top military staffs and the top scientists who could—perhaps—still make use of Degnan's special knowledge in time.

Degnan had firmly intended to sleep through the flight, but a gnawing unrest kept him wide awake now. Deliberately he lit a cigarette; by the time it was smoked down the flier might be over China. He found himself alternately glancing at his watch and staring with smarting eyes out the window, into the flaming cauldron of clouds that brightened as the ship rose higher, then began fading again as its flight outran the sunrise. His imagination did strange things with it, turned it into something terrible, a burning wind and fire that swept over the face of the Earth and left lifeless desert behind. The Over Race's final weapon, with which their radio had threatened Earth again last night...

Probably a bluff, he told himself angrily. And why should it occur to him now? He could do nothing that he was not doing already—going at a dozen miles a second to save

Earth from the hyperspace bombardment.

But why the deadly pressure behind his racing thoughts, the cold knot of fear in his stomach, his sense that the sands were running out?

A change of pitch in the high screaming of thin air outside told him the ship was going down, probably slowing as well toward a landing. It rocked and swerved a little, battered by the changing pressures of a too-swift descent, and Degnan glimpsed a vast sweep of ocean, glittering in faint moonlight, unbroken by any land. All at once he remembered that these gravitic fliers could travel under water as well, and he knew where Combined Fleet Headquarters was—under the bottom of the Pacific, below one of the great deeps. The only place on Earth, sheltered under all that cushioning water, that no interplanetary bombardment could reach. There might have been a political motive for the choice of location, too; the oceans had belonged to no nation since the first feeble international laws were set up.

A MINUTE or two left. The roar of riven air grew louder, more ominous—like the whistle of a shell prolonged intolerably, for a lifetime before the explosion thunders, like the scream of a falling bomb—

A bomb was falling, howling and shrieking its tuneless death song before it blew itself into nothingness and took with it the whole Earth, everything, everything that had been good and bad and indifferent in the world of man. Its crescendo noise swelled and beat against the confines of Degnan's skull, drowning the one silent sound that he had to hear.

Something in his brain was strug-

gling, beating on a closed and barricaded door, shouting incoherently into the clamor of the descending bomb. Degnan saw only the sweeping second-hand of his watch. He had to understand, to remember before that hand went round once or twice again and it was too late forever and ever.

Something was coming up out of the abyss of darkness and drugged forgetfulness. The gleam of his watch-face transformed itself into the pitiless shining eyes of a great Venusian, eyes cold and burning with knowledge and passionless will.

It was a scientist and a ruler—one of the masters of the Over Race, who would some day be masters of the Universe. As man had foolishly dreamed...

"Forget," it seemed to drone in the travesty of human speech that was the best their voice-converters could make of Venusian speech-sounds. "Forget one minute longer, and the experiment will succeed. Go on. You cannot fail. We cannot fail."

It lied. With a savage effort of will, he wiped the vision out of existence. And as it vanished, the flood-gates of memory were opened, and he knew—what Venus had planned, what he had been about to do.

As Degnan's sight cleared, he found himself on his feet, swaying like a drunken man. Before him danced a face, that of his escort, whom he must have pushed aside as he stood up—a shocked stare, dawning suspicion: "What's the matter with you?"

Degnan faltered only a moment. With merciless clarity he realized the impossibility of explaining to this man, or any other, in the time that was left; with regret, but with brutal purposefulness, he hit the agent on the point of the jaw and

saw the man fall down limply.

The pilot had still less warning. Degnan struck one skillful, chopping blow and snatched at the control bar; through the nose window he saw the steely glint of waves sliding swiftly nearer, and yanked. He felt nothing, of course, through the full-gravity-thrust drive. But now there was only the night sky in the window, and he knew the flier was climbing almost vertically. Only then did he heave the half-stunned pilot out of his seat and into the aisle of the passenger compartment.

HE SANK into the seat, breathing hard, momentarily incapable of further thought or action. Through timeless intervals, the sky's turbid darkness gave place to a hard, crystal-clear blackness, and in it the stars came out and shone with unwinking brilliance. On the control panel an alarm buzzed stridently and a red light winked on and off. That meant the flier was approaching the danger limit for unshielded atmospheric craft, radiation in the space around it becoming dangerous to life. Still, it was a while before Degnan stirred to shift the controls and drop Earthward again.

He leveled out in the stratosphere, recovering from shock and beginning to think furiously. There was no hiding here, high up in air; within minutes, at most, an alarm would be out and radar tracers searching for the flier. Overpowering the other, seizing the ship had been an almost instinctive reaction of self-preservation; it made no real difference in his position. He was outlawed anyway, exiled from Earth now and forever by the strangest and most terrible fate a man had ever suffered.

Behind him someone groaned, be-

ginning to come to. Almost without looking around, Degnan slammed and locked the door of the pilot's compartment. Clinging desperately to sanity, he tried to form a plan.

He knew now the nature of the Venusians' final weapon. He was that weapon.

Every atom of his body, every particle of flesh and blood and bone was a grain of explosive waiting for the flash of a detonator.

Earthmen had known, without thoroughly understanding, that the Over Race's science could convert any inorganic substance into fissionable material without changing its overt physical or chemical properties; for that reason, import of articles from Venus had been rigorously supervised. They had not known, the enemy had carefully kept them from finding out, that the same thing could be done with living matter. The Venusian liberation of nuclear energy was inferior, in ergs returned for ergs invested, to Earth's use of the power metals—but it had the one decisive advantage in war, that a Venusian atomic bomb could take any form, even that of a living, breathing man. *The one form in which it would surely pass Earth's defenses and find its way—*

Degnan remembered what the detonating impulse was to have been. A simple and thoroughly Venusian device. His arrival—his own realization that he had arrived—at CFHQ would have been the trigger.

Mass times the velocity of light squared—he tried briefly to calculate the force of explosion, and recoiled from the figures that suggested themselves. At the very least, Earth's vital center would have vanished into dust together with cubic miles of the planet's surface.



He braked the flier swiftly and swooped low over the mysterious surface . . .

H E COULDN'T go back. If he were taken to CFHQ, even his conscious knowledge of what was to come would not check the automatic reaction. Even his lifeless body must not return to Earth. It was that thought, largely, that had kept him from heading the flier on into space and the burning bath of radiation; the defense patrol would intercept it and bring him back, alive or dead. He couldn't imagine that there was any alternative way of setting off the explosion, any control that could reach across space from Venus—but the danger was too great for any chance to be taken.

Also, he was not the kind of man to display suicidal courage until every other kind of courage had failed.

The Venusians had known him well, he realized sickly, when they had chosen him. They had planned every step ahead, foreseen everything, when they had arranged his "escape" from the *Sheneb*, his return to Earth with the knowledge they had deliberately planted in his mind, knowledge important enough to make sure he would be sent to CFHQ—latent, triggered into consciousness by the fall of the first hyperspace projectile. Perhaps they had even made sure to see that he would be in the open to see that by inspiring Margaret Lusk to make a date with him in the park; at all events, her call had been a psychological primer, to put him in a receptive mood. His capture by the Venusians' slaves, to be sure, had been a crossup in their scheme—it showed, what might be important, that they didn't have direct mental control over the humans they had worked on—but it had made little difference. They had known he would get through; they had chosen their instrument with perfect understand-

ing of human psychology... But, no: their plan had failed at the last moment, when the mental blocks they had used on Degnan had gone down by a miracle he was still too dazed to question. There was still room to hope.

Drenched in cold sweat, Degnan stared at the gleaming dials and knobs before him, the paling sky beyond the nose of the flier. He had headed it mechanically back the way it had come, toward the North American coast. And now an idea began to glimmer... He would be risking not only his own life—*forfeit already!*—but many others besides; yet on the other hand... Convulsively he leaned forward and spun the power rheostat as far as it would go.

The line of shore was featureless in the light of a gray dawn, encroaching on the oily darkness of the sea. Degnan braked the flier swiftly and swooped lower, finding partial orientation by the lights that still shone sickly here and there, where Los Angeles sprawled to southward.

At last he located the little bay he knew. Rummaging hastily in a storage compartment, he found the automatic pistol stowed there as per some ancient regulation having to do with mutiny on shipboard; he thrust it into a trousers pocket. He cast his coat aside, and dropped the flier still lower. When it drifted at a bare twenty miles an hour only a few feet above still deep water not far offshore, he flung open the emergency door, took a deep breath and in the same motion pulled back on the control bar and leaped clear.

W HEN HE broke the surface, striking out for the beach, he dashed the water from his eyes and saw the flier already far away, climb-

ing and vanishing into the gray-rose sky. The farther it traveled before it was picked up, the less help it would be to the men who shortly would be combing the planet to find him.

If they could know not only where he was but *what* he was—there would probably be a mass exodus from Los Angeles right now. He reflected grimly that, if the worst were realized, if there were an open switch on Venus that would be closed when the enemy grew tired of waiting, Los Angeles would get it whether he was there or not. He had stayed there two days—and a nail-paring of his, a stray hair from his head, would be enough to level city blocks.

He splashed ashore and broke into a jogging run that, weary as he was, he could keep up for the short distance he had to go.

As he ran, the Earth seemed to groan beneath his steps with a premonition of catastrophe.

He couldn't go to the authorities again; with horrible vividness he pictured himself trying to explain to them, being called crazy and shipped back, a prisoner, drugged perhaps, to CFHQ so the scientists there could pick his brains. But he had to have help, and he was going to the only place on Earth where help might be.

The wide white house came into sight as he rounded a bend in the beach road. Built in the rambling California style, among pruned green gardens on a rise of ground, it had a view of the sea from its flat roof—the roof where, on a warm night with a great moon silvering the Pacific, he had got engaged to Athalie, once in a world that was far away and unreal. Tonight, if tonight ever came, there would be no moon.

But Athalie was there. He found her—having flung open the unlocked

door and plunged inside without ceremony, in a sudden fear lest the house be as deserted as it looked—in the spacious living room; she was huddled in a big chair, against the wall opposite the great windows that looked eastward across the dunes, staring out at the brightening sunrise.

She didn't seem to see him standing in the doorway. He called hoarsely, "Athalie!"

The girl raised her head, saw him, and sprang to her feet in a quick scared motion. She took a recoiling step.

"It's me. Ralph." He came toward her, and she did not retreat again, but her gaze on him was feverish and blank. There were sleepless shadows under her eyes, her bright hair was unkempt, her makeup smudged, some of her fingernails broken and untrimmed. Half-consciously Degnan noted those details and could not understand, until he remembered that she, like all Earth, had gone through the night of terror, the hours of the hyperspace bombardment. He hesitated. "Is your father here?"

She shook her head, said painfully, "He went with the Fleet. He had a reserve commission, and he got them to take him. He went on one of the battleships—I don't remember which one."

DEGNAN was prey to a sinking feeling. He would greatly have preferred, just now, to talk to Charles Norton, who was his friend and whose combination of hardheadedness and imagination he respected... But Athalie would have to do. Certainly the quarrel they'd had counted for less than nothing now.

He said with an uncontrollably pounding heart, "And your father's yacht—did it go out with the Fleet?"

"No. The guns weren't ready, or something. What do you want?" she demanded uncomprehendingly.

"I want that ship," said Degnan, and the way he said it made her take another backward step. Her lips moved and relaxed without framing a question. "It's still on his field? Guarded?" She nodded, finally got out, "Why?"

He ignored the query. His whole being was centered on the need to get that ship—perhaps the only space-going vessel left on Earth now which had a full-gravitic drive, which might carry him through Earth's defense and out of reach... "Listen. They'll let you in to look at the ship, won't they? And maybe me with you. You've got to help me get to the Azor's controls."

She went on staring at him; then a spark of the old strong-willed Athalie flared up. "You must be crazy! Where have you been? What's happened? What can you possibly—"

He took a deep breath, realizing the strange figure he must be—drenched from head to foot, haggard, the awful burden he carried showing in his face. "I want to go to Venus," he said, and regretted it the same moment; now he would have to explain, and he had hoped to get Athalie's help without that.

"Now I know you're crazy. Venus! Nobody can go to Venus. The Venusians are coming here..." She broke; her body shook with sobs, but her eyes were dry and over-bright.

He might have tried to comfort her, but somehow the strength wasn't in him. He stood gazing down at her, and in terse sentences, jealous of the time that was trickling through his fingers—in a toneless voice, as one telling a story already grown old, he related what had happened since

yesterday evening; told her why he must go to Venus, or failing that at least leave Earth, if he died in the attempt.

She quieted, and as he finished, shrank back against the wall, pressing her hands against it. His eyes bored into her, seeking; but he could not tell whether she believed or not.

AFTER A silence that was not long, but seemed so, Athalie said, "But even if it's true—it doesn't make any difference. Everything's over anyway. We—Earth is going to surrender."

"The hell you say!"

She nodded abstractedly, as if he had agreed. "It was on the radio a few minutes ago. A message from Venus: if we don't surrender, they'll start the bombardment again at one o'clock. We couldn't stand it—you see that, don't you? They broadcast the message, because the censorship is down—we've all got to make up our minds now. And the Nations' delegates are meeting to decide."

The world seemed to rock around Degnan. He muttered hoarsely, "The Fleets..."

"They can't win. The radio didn't say that, of course—but everybody knows it's hopeless." She straightened suddenly and grasped at his arm with nervous strength, her manner fevered again. "Ralph! The Venusians have promised to let some people go, to live on Mars. They'll let us go if they think we're on their side. Help me think, Ralph—how can we make them understand we're in favor of surrendering?"

For a moment Degnan felt hollow, sick and weak inside; he realized how tired he was... He set his teeth and caught Athalie by both shoulders in a grip that made her cry out sharply. "That's enough of that!"

Mankind isn't ready to quit yet. And you—you'll do one last thing for your own world before you start bowing and scraping to Venus!"

Athalie had wilted. He felt her trembling, knew it was fear of him and did not relent. Nothing mattered now except his purpose.

There was a half-mad light in the eyes that met his—or perhaps they only reflected his own. She faltered, "Don't, don't—I will."

He let her go, feeling at last a touch of pity for her. Last night had shattered her brittle self-confidence, left her subject to only one motive: fear.

He ordered, "Take me to the *Azor*."

It was Degnan who took the wheel of Athalie's sky-blue speedster and pushed it at savage speed over the road that wound along the shore. But as Charles Norton's one-time private landing field came in sight, he slowed and flung at the girl:

"I'll be an engineer friend of yours, who wants to see—informally—if the ship mightn't be usable after all. I can talk some technical language, and you vouch for me... At least they'll be thrown off guard."

There had been a low fence around the field when he had seen it last; the military had heightened that and topped it with barbed wire. One gate was closed and barricaded; beside the other one, a flimsily-built guardhouse. And beyond the fence—the *Azor*, its once golden hull painted space-black, a spidery temporary scaffolding about it. Work was evidently at a standstill now. They wouldn't have touched the engines, though; and even if the ship weren't sealable he could fly it in a vacuum suit.

HE WAS WELL aware that he had no chance of getting to Venus alive. But he knew the *Azor*

of old, knew what its powerful drivers would do; there would be an excellent chance of shooting past the units of Earth's defense patrol that had not been drawn off by the offensive, into deep space, and once out there—set a collision course for Venus and give the engines full power. By the time the fuel was exhausted, the ship would have a velocity of over five thousand miles a second. Even if it were blasted to fragments when it hit the Venusians' barrage, the fragments would still have the momentum of its two thousand tons.

And if that death plunge should carry him close enough to the enemy world—There was a question which, when it first occurred to him, he had hastily crammed back into the darkest recess of his mind; he brought it into the light now. If he were to think, with deliberate conviction: I am at Combined Fleet Headquarters—now!—would that thought set off the reaction, before the brain censor could label it a lie?

He set the brakes in front of the gateway and reached for the door-button, eyes still fixed hungrily on the space ship. Then a scuffling sound jerked his head around—and he saw the car's other door already open, and Athalie outside, running, stumbling across the sand toward the guardhouse, crying shrilly, "Help! Help! There's a crazy man out here!"

For only an instant, Degnan sat stunned. The thought streaked through his head: I should never have looked away. If I'd only kept my eyes on her she'd never have dared—But there was no time for regrets. A uniformed figure had appeared at the door of the guard-shack, and the sun flashed on metal in its hands.

Degnan slammed full power into the drive unit and spun the wheel; the car whipped round with violence that almost blacked him out. There was only one way to go and that was back, a quarter mile of naked shore before the road dipped from sight, and he took that road at a hundred, a hundred and fifty miles an hour, tires screaming on the curves. He thought he heard a shout behind; but he was counting on the fellow not shooting before he found out what was up. For a wild moment, he had thought of crashing the fence; but then the guard would certainly have opened fire.

The rising ground hid him, and he released held breath. But he didn't slacken the deadly pace for half a mile more; then, within sight of the Norton house, he swung the car off the road, careening into the ditch where it would be partly shielded from aerial view by a couple of scrubby pines, and sprang out. His weary muscles responded poorly, but he drove himself into a dogged run— inland, toward the city.

Within minutes the hunt would be up—on the ground, in the sky, many against one, and sometime the lone quarry must stop, rest, while the ring closed in...

Skirting a tree-bordered road, he slowed at last to a walk. The road and the air above seemed deserted, but he kept under cover of the trees. Ahead, the sun climbed higher—a weird sun, a white disk through the high pall of dust that hung over the Earth.

SOMETIME later, he was in an outlying business center; normally its streets would have already been crowded at this hour, but today there were few people, and those hung in

knots on the street-corner or crept aimlessly about, glancing up in furtive fear at the pallid sky. Among them, Degnan's bedragglement and his haggard look was not conspicuous; his clothes had finished drying as he ran, and he had halted briefly to brush away the incrustated salt. He breathed more deeply; by losing himself among Los Angeles' millions, he would at least gain a little time.

Much further on, in a little park, he crept beneath a dense thicket of bushes to rest. The leaves sagged tiredly under a film of sooty dust, and as the day wore on it was growing crushingly hot, as before a thunderstorm. At one o'clock—

With continuing effort Degnan held himself just above the edge of sleep, letting his body rest while his mind stayed feverishly awake. Could he ever sleep again? For he might dream—An hour or more, by the white sun he lay there—his watch had stopped since his plunge into the sea—and at the end of that time got stiffly to his feet and went on. Aimlessly now, for there was no use trying to put more distance between himself and the point where he had last been seen—the point around which they would have drawn a circle, within which he must be. Perhaps they already knew, by a process of elimination, that he had gone into the city.

He knew now that no one on Earth would believe his story. Athalie... She had not believed—not that it would have made any difference; she was too far gone in hysteria. She hadn't even been scheming to get him caught, back there; she had only been running away.

Here and there on the streets he saw pairs and groups of new citizen militia, grim-faced, with arm-bands

and rifles, often accompanied by regular police robots. The night just past must have created a problem of order the regular forces couldn't handle; there would be many who, like Athalie, had lost their heads completely, and their panic could take unpleasant forms. Human civilization had been shaken to its roots. And over every effort to hold it upright now lay the shadow—the new Venusian ultimatum.

Somewhere on Earth, out there under the Pacific, no doubt, the United Nations' delegates were meeting under that shadow. And in each of them—the poisonous thought: "They've promised to spare a few. If one should speak out now for surrender—"

Those men would surely reject such a motive with revulsion. But there was another, more insidious thought: "Man's time has come, to go the common way of a million other species, of the dodo and the tyrannosaur—outclassed and replaced. What use to struggle against a higher life form?"

IN ALL THE millennia of his blundering, bloody history, man had achieved no more than the vision of detached intelligence, emancipated from the blind compelling forces that rose constantly out of his unconscious to mock him with apethood. The unconscious is the larger part of *Homo sapiens'* mind; there had been dreams of a *Homo superior* to come some day... But the Over Race had such intelligence now.

Some Earthly psychologists had claimed—and the Venusians had never denied—that the brain of the Over Being was actually inferior, in absolute potential, to the human. But their potential intelligence was one hundred per cent realized and unin-

hibited by feelings; it wasn't that they lacked emotional drives, but their emotions were on the conscious level, the intellect dominant.

The history of Venus was relatively short, as the Over Race was a recent mutation of their lesser kin whose psychic structure resembled that of men. But that history was one single purposefully rising curve, without the waverings and cyclic reversions of man's past; on Venus there had been no dark ages, no great divisions and wars. In the absence of the factors which had made introspection a hissing and a byword among Earthly psychological methods, the science of mind had led technical achievement—but that too had advanced on the rising curve. That the first ships to cross space had been Terrestrial was perhaps only an accident; under their cloud blanket the Venusians had had little idea of astronomy, no direct knowledge of stars and planets.

That was a basic environmental difference. Through all his wanderings and dark ages, man had seen the stars overhead, and dreamed dreams; he had been at last almost ready to reach out for the stars...

That was the last and greatest prize at stake in this last war: the right to fulfill that human dream. Only for the Venusians, if they won, it would be no such fulfillment, but only another episode in the smooth mechanical functioning of their total intelligence.

Yet, for all their superiority, they had made one basic mistake in the field where they were strongest; Degnan, on whom the error had been made, could recognize it now. They had wholly misunderstood the duality of the human mind, supposed that knowledge erased from the unconscious would no longer affect the

subject's motives or actions. But human psychologists, who had fumbled at the gates of the unconscious for centuries, knew that to it belonged the complex of blind forces which the old theologians had called "conscience", and to which various names had been given since Freud's pioneer hypotheses; by any name it was the same, a power greater in the end than merely conscious reason or will. The Over Race could not be expected to see that; their mentality was by definition conscienceless...

THE SIGHT of a squad of armed militiamen jarred Degnan out of a sleep-walking bemusement and made him step quickly into the doorway of a cafe, to busy himself holding matches to a waterlogged cigarette. The cafe was open, and he glimpsed a lighted television screen inside; he realized then two of his own most immediate problems—he must eat if he were to have the strength to keep going, and he must know whether a general alarm had gone out for him.

In the latter he was almost incredibly lucky. He had scarcely collected a hasty meal and sat down inconspicuously in a corner—fortunately the cafe was an automat—when the screen blazed with an announcement, at once printed and spoken for extra emphasis:

"The persons whose pictures will be shown immediately following are slaves of Venus and traitors to Earth. They are believed to be somewhere in this city. All citizens are requested to watch for them and assist in their capture dead or alive."

A series of over a dozen pictures, with names, ages, other data, displayed for a minute or two apiece. Among them Degnan recognized the red-faced Clark; and last in the

series was Margaret Lusk. Degnan's heart contracted strangely as her image filled the screen; it was a moving picture, breathtakingly real, and it must have been taken some time ago, before she had gone to Venus, for in it she was smiling with a care-free gayety he had never seen in the brief time he had known her, and in the background were glimpses of a summer landscape of Earth...

Then a repetition of the announcement. "The persons whose pictures have just been shown... Dead or alive!"

Degnan bitterly regretted not having advised the girl to go straight to the police. But everything had seemed so simple then. Now—it wasn't likely to make any difference to her, or anybody else, before long, anyway.

The important thing was that they hadn't broadcast his picture. Perhaps that meant they still hadn't come to a decision about what was behind his disappearance; certainly, at least, it meant they wanted him alive.

If they caught him, it wouldn't be alive. It was as good as certain now that his dead body would be harmless, that the only trigger was a perceptive reaction in his living brain. By now the Venusians, as their new ultimatum showed, had written their "final weapon" off the books and were going on to victory without it.

Degnan froze; the telescreen now showed a news-announcer, and "the Fleets" had come crashing into his consciousness.

THE ANNOUNCER'S face had an ill-hidden strained, hunted look. "...that military operations which began around Venus at eight o'clock Pacific Time had practically ceased. Some units of the Combined Fleets,

including a number of cruisers and lighter craft, were reported regrouping between Venus and the Sun, with a good chance of returning safely to Earth. The two battleships, *San Ch'ieh* and *Yucatan*, previously thought to have escaped the Venusian barrage, are now definitely known to have been lost. . . .

Mechanically, Degnan glanced at the clock beside the telescreen. It was eleven o'clock; three hours since the Fleets had contacted the enemy.

And it was evident that the Fleets had been destroyed. At the moment he didn't even care much about learning the details; he only half listened as the announcer went on, in a taut unnatural voice, briefly reviewing the disastrous Battle of Venus. Little enough was known—only that the Over Race had produced some new and frightful wizardry, that Earth ships had exploded and disintegrated in apparently clear space still a quarter of a million miles from the enemy world, attacked by something which neither ordinary equipment nor that hastily rigged up to cope with hyperspace missiles could detect or fend off. With what he alone knew, Degnan could guess at the nature of that attack. A variation on the hyperspace principle, pulsating fields projected by devices too small to register on detectors until it was too late; the ships must have torn themselves apart as portions of their structures ceased to obey the same physical laws as the rest. . . .

Within those three hours the last of the great battleships, Earth's pride and power, were dead. One of those ships, given ten minutes inside the enemy's defenses, could have reduced the part of Venus inhabited by the Over Race to something resembling the surface of the Moon; but they had never had a chance to get that

near, had never, after the first contact, had even a chance to win free again.

With a shrinking foreboding, Degnan glanced round him, covertly studying the faces of the other people in the cafe. In them he did not find the shock and unwillingness to believe that he felt himself—but then these people had, no doubt, heard earlier reports and had time to grow familiar with catastrophe. He did see an ominous blankness, a helpless, hopeless fixity in the eyes that watched the screen, that might mean resigned despair—might mean the end. If people like these, a couple of billion of them in all the lands of Earth, were ready to give up, it would be their decision that counted. The delegates' votes would be cast according to what the observers in their various countries reported on the state of mass feeling, on the results of hurried surveys, the resolutions of local political organizations. . . . It was obvious that, as Athalie had said, the censorship had been removed, complete freedom of information restored; that at least was a heroic gesture in what might be man's last hour.

DEGNAN compelled himself to finish eating and drinking, and went into the streets again, under the veiled noonday sun. He had to keep going—the more nearly he was approaching the end of his strength, the more surely he had to keep moving; if he stopped for long, he might sleep, and sleeping be captured. But as long as he was awake and in command of himself—Degnan's hand tightened on the pistol that reposed in his pocket.

He wasn't much worried about the militia now, and was sure he had nothing to fear from the bulk of the people he passed, or who passed

him by—merely wandering aimlessly, like him, or going mechanically about business that no longer mattered. He wondered what they would do, if they knew what walked among them—run screaming for non-existent safety, or merely stand rooted in a numbness beyond fear?

The pale sun had passed the zenith; the air hung dusty, hot and heavy as the air before a storm, unshaken in the abnormal silence that lay over the city. But in that silence Degnan heard suddenly an explosion of voices, a murmur that rose and swelled with bursting tension. He saw a cluster of people on the street-corner ahead. They pressed round a news-vending machine; sheets fluttered, were snatched and torn as the crowd jostled and grew.

Degnan sensed that the storm had already broken. Careless for the moment of attracting attention, he grasped an arm on the outskirts of the mob; "What's up?"

The man turned with an unseeing stare, then gestured at a paper that was held briefly aloft by someone, its headline vivid:

UN REJECTS VENUS DEMAND

Somehow he was a couple of blocks further on, hearing the same story from a public newsscreen. Ten minutes ago the Nations' delegates had voted unanimously against surrender; perhaps their decision had been made much earlier, but they had delayed, gaining time.

The crowd collected in front of the screen blocked the street, but even now, after the first stirring, they were surprisingly quiet. Most of them wore the same still, set expression that Degnan had seen and tried to analyze before, but now, looking from one to the other, he saw those faces with new eyes. Re-

signed they were—resigned to suffer and die if it must be, without shouting and fanfares, but not to yield.

And in him rose a feeling long unfamiliar—a sweet and poignant sense of pride in his own kind. If man were about to pass into extinction, he would not go like the dodos that bowed their heads under the clubs, but as the last tyrannosaur or the last sabertoothed tiger must have perished—fighting.

DEGNAN felt clearheaded once more, stronger; it was as if a part of his burden and weariness had been taken from him. The spirit of Earth's peoples, expressed in that unanimous vote—even if their unity should mean no more now than that of the Five Nations of the Iroquois or of Sitting Bull's confederacy had meant against the white man's rifles—was something to remember to the very end.

Someone in the crowd shouted, loud above the rustle of voices, and pointed into the sky; and many, Degnan among them, looked up in time to see a great ball of fire that fell through the overcast, seemed for a moment striking at the city, then veered away and vanished into the west.

The voices blended in a long sigh. The torment had begun again, and this time there would be no reprieve... Presently there were other flashes in the clouds, moanings and whistlings far up in air, the hurtling fire-trails of last-ditch interception missiles rising from Earth itself. With what the defenders had learned and the preparations that must have been made in over twelve hours' respite, it should be possible, for a time, to destroy most of the enemy projectiles or at least deflect them away from the great population centers; it might even be days before the

world's defensive stores were exhausted. But it would be folly to hope that the Over Race was not ready to carry on the bombardment that long, for as long as they needed to.

Degnan stood motionless, face upturned like the rest; but inside him was a sudden turmoil. It was as if the sight of that first fireball had tripped a spring in his head, even as a similar spectacle had last night—but then the spring had been set by Venus. This time was different; there was no flash of memory lighting up the dark places of his mind, but facts he knew long since were falling into place with swift precision.

Abruptly he whirled, pushed his way ruthlessly out of the crowd and began to run.

He pounded through deserted streets and past other skyward-staring groups clustered round the news centers, while above the lightning flickered, up there where the Battle of Earth was being fought. He no longer saw it. Before him danced images from memory, and most constant among them was the vision of Margaret—a queerly superimposed picture, that, of her face as he had seen it last in reality, shadowed by horror past, and as she looked at him from the screen, smiling unafraid in a world that was gone. And in his ears was the echo of words she had spoken last night.

And there was a mathematical certainty. The end of the first hyperspace bombardment had come shortly before midnight—bare minutes after Degnan had arrived at NAMI headquarters. For some six hours, then, the Venusians had held their fire without explanation.

To Degnan the reason was clear. They had discontinued the assault lest it interfere with the functioning

of their final weapon. Forced at last to assume that something had gone wrong, they had sent the ultimatum, allowing another quarter-day for its acceptance, during which Degnan might still conceivably accomplish their plan. And now at last they had given him up...

But they could not have known what time he got to the NAMI office. No matter how uncanny their ability to foresee probabilities—and they had shown it amply in the scheme they had built around him—they couldn't have calculated that closely, if for no other reason than that his involvement with their own agents would have upset all timetables.

Unless—

Margaret saying: *"Sometimes I can feel it trying to creep back..."*

If that had been a post-hypnotic effect, it meant nothing. But if it were what she had seemed to think it was, if she had been—possessed—by an alien mind millions of miles away, on Venus—then the Venusians could have known through her. It seemed impossible, but it made the picture complete. Degnan had judged her telepathically sensitive; and now he could guess, for the first time, why she had been returned to Earth with him.

And she had helped him escape—why? Degnan winced. But it didn't matter. What mattered now was to find her, use her in one last attempt...

AS DEGNAN ran, there settled on his shoulders a new burden of responsibility, and that which he had had to bear before seemed light. For he was about to take the fate of worlds deliberately into his own hands.

Pounding heart and straining lungs told him he couldn't keep up this pace much longer—and there

must be miles to go; he was still only roughly oriented in the unfamiliar section of the city to which his wanderings had led him. Grudgingly, he slowed to a rapid walk. Public transportation seemed to have vanished, and there were very few vehicles of any kind moving; Degnan glanced wistfully at the occasional parked cars, but to appropriate one would take time and tools he didn't have.

Ahead of him walls and windows were suddenly lit by a flash far brighter than the murky day. He looked back into the west, and saw there a cloud rising, an immense inverted cone of steam and spray, losing shape as the fire within it faded, dwarfing all the city's buildings. A hyperspace projectile had barely missed and had fallen into the ocean.

Moments later the ground jarred and shook with a force that flung Degnan to the pavement. He heard the tinkle of shattering glass and from somewhere the prolonged roar of collapsing structures. Dust and plaster fell from overhead. He scrambled to his feet and broke into a run again.

Three quarters of an hour later, spent from haste and from struggling through streets half-blocked with rubble, he reached his goal.

The small hotel looked deserted, though it was practically undamaged, having lost no more than a few windows. Degnan panted up the stairs—and paused in dismay; the door of the room where he had told Margaret to stay stood ajar.

As by its own will, his hand dipped into his pocket and came out with the pistol, slipped off the safety catch. Dead silence all around. He pushed the door wide with an abrupt motion, and looked into an empty room, almost as he had seen it last.

A picture hanging askew, a lamp toppled—but that was no doubt caused by the temblors just past. Intuitively he knew she was gone, and at the same time his mind refused stupidly to grasp the possibility—gone without leaving any word? Or taken away?

Then a scuffling sound from behind warned him; he spun and recoiled inside the room, catching a flashing glimpse of the half-dozen men in police uniforms and civilian clothes who had appeared almost soundlessly. Degnan heaved a table against the door just as a crashing impact sprung the latch. A second blow jarred the heavy table back a couple of inches. Then Degnan took aim at the door, just above head level, and fired.

A sound of hasty steps and silence again, broken only by a mutter of voices in which he could catch no words.

He was in the bag. The room was on the third floor, and even so there'd be others posted around. This was the end...

“WHAT'S THE matter, Ralph? Can't we talk this over?”

Jay Marlin's voice from the hall outside. Degnan shifted his grip on the pistol butt, grown slippery in his hand. He answered in a flat voice, “No. I'm afraid not, Jay.”

“Listen—we've got plenty of guns and gas out here, but we don't want to use either one. There are some who think the Venusians got to you, Ralph; but I don't believe it, I don't believe you'd turn against us. Whatever's happened, it can't be as important right now as a defense against the bombardment. And you're the only man that can give us that, the only man that can save Earth!”

How close that was to the truth and yet how grotesquely far away! He was not Earth's salvation but its

greatest danger. Try to explain that? He remembered Athalie's unbelief and treachery. The chance was too great, the danger too monstrous. And yet—

He was silent, trying for a moment to put everything else out of his mind and look sanely, objectively at the thought that had come to him, trying to be sure it was not just that he was cracking up, his personal urge to cling to life getting the upper hand and urging him to grasp at a hope that was not there.

He said from a dry throat, "There was a girl here—"

"She's all right. We picked her up early this morning."

So Margaret had already been in their hands when her picture was broadcast. They would have suspected he might come back here, sent out the picture in hopes of increasing the probability. And they had guessed right, without knowing all that was at stake.

"Jay."

"Yes?"

"Maybe we can make a bargain."

"Name it!"

"I've got to have a solemn promise. Let me talk to that girl for a little while—half an hour. It doesn't have to be alone, just undisturbed. At the end of that time, I'll go quietly to CFHQ, unless—and you've got to promise me that, too—unless by then the bombardment has stopped."

There was a brief pause; then Jay Marlin said, "My word on that wouldn't do you much good. I'll have to call headquarters; that'll take a couple of minutes. These other men will stay right where they are. All right?"

"All right," said Degnan. He didn't move, but stood facing the door, the automatic in his hand.

After a lifetime, the other was

there again. "Ralph—it's okay. I talked to General Fleming himself. He promises you'll be given what you ask."

Degan let the gun fall; it thudded dully on the carpet. He pushed his barricade aside and let the door swing open.

IN THE anteroom of Fleming's office, Jay Marlin pressed his hand. "Good luck. I don't know what you're trying to do, Ralph—but good luck anyway." He wheeled sharply, and went out before Degnan could manage so much as "Thanks."

There, thought Degnan, went a man who would have believed him.

Other NAMI agents accompanied Degnan into the office. The General was waiting, looking older than he had last night; with him was a youngish man with a smooth face and Mongoloid eyes.

"This is Mr. King," General Fleming waved a hand jerkily, "liaison deputy from Combined Fleet Headquarters. By his permission, we shan't have located you—officially—until thirty minutes from now."

King nodded, glanced silently at an expensive wrist watch.

Degnan hardly gave either of them a second look. He had eyes only for Margaret Lusk.

She was in a chair beside the General's big desk, and she looked very small and dejected. But at sight of Degnan she sprang to her feet with a tremulous glad cry.

"Ralph, Ralph!" She flung her arms about his neck. "They told me you'd disappeared—and I thought—"

"Easy," he said softly. "Things haven't gone just the way I figured, Margaret. I need your help again."

She raised her head and looked into his face clear-eyed. "Tell me how."

He couldn't believe, now, the dark suspicions that had burgeoned again

not long ago—and that made what he had to ask harder. He steeled himself.

"Remember what you told me last night? About the thing that kept trying to creep back. Is it still trying?" A shadow of pain crossed the face close to his; she closed her eyes as if to shut something out.

"I think so—I'm afraid—"

"Stop being afraid—and let it come back, have control again just for a little while. You've built up a defense against it—you've got to tear the wall down now. It's the only thing that will help—and you're the only one that can do it." He was at once commanding and pleading.

She shuddered, then was quiet; but he could feel the effort she was making, the tenseness of her body. "I—I'll try."

GENTLY he seated her in the chair.

She looked up at him for a long moment, then leaned back. After a little she closed her eyes, and he saw a wave of revulsion pass over her face. Her hands clenched in her lap and then slowly, deliberately unclasped. Her eyes stayed shut and she was still.

Degnan had to know how fast his time was passing. He glanced round and saw no clock, but his eye lit on King; he made a peremptory beckoning motion and pointed to his own wrist. The other man's slanted eyes read the gesture; face impassive, he unfastened his watch and handed it over.

Five, six minutes gone. "Margaret!"

Her eyes opened and stared; they were blank, blind, as they had been when he first looked into them on the *Sheneb*.

Degnan spoke to her, to the thing behind her eyes, slowly and distinctly. "I have twenty-four minutes left.

When that time is up, unless by then the hyperspace bombardment has ceased and Venus is ready to surrender, I will be sent to Combined Fleet Headquarters. The Headquarters is located at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean." Out of the corner of his eye he saw the General and the liaison agent start and look at one another. He went on steadily, "Earth's oceans are water, hydrogen oxide. Their total mass is in the neighborhood of one and one-half quintillion tons, of which about one-tenth is hydrogen. One gram of hydrogen, converted into helium, yields seventeen hundred billion calories of heat..."

He added a few more rough calculations. The enemy could check and reduce them to exactitude in next to no time—if the message were heard, if the thing in Margaret's eye was not only here, in her mind, but also *there*, forty million miles away...

If they heard, and if they believed, it would take them time to decide—though far less time than men would have needed—and again time for radio signals to halt the hyperspace projectiles that were on their way to Earth now. And how long might it take for a thought to cross space? The speed of light—or less, or more? There was no way of knowing. The hands of King's watch moved at abnormal speed, as if the mechanism were running mad.

Degnan began again, repeated the message almost word for word, with slow deadly emphasis. It was as if his naked will strained to bridge the gulf of nothing and make contact with the enemy.

Venusians were not men. No man quite knew how they would respond to a given situation. He was offering them, now, the choice they had hurled at Earth: surrender or die. The people of Earth were willing to

accept death before defeat. But the Over Race was coldly logical, and Degnan felt sure that it would not respond as man had done...

THERE was silence when he finished. And in the stillness the faint tintinnabulation of small objects in the room, responding to the Earth's ceaseless vibration beneath the onslaught it was enduring. The floor shook solidly, once or twice, at shock-waves from nearer hits.

Two-thirds of his time was gone. No use repeating the threat again—the battle was already lost or won.

Perhaps the Over Race could recognize one of their errors now—an oversight that was understandable, since Venus had no water and no oceans, and the chance of a sufficiently violent explosion under the pressure of a great mass of water inducing the hydrogen-helium reaction, by a star, must never have played much part in their thinking. But of course they knew the theoretical possibility, and that once begun in a hydrogen concentration vastly above that in the Sun, it would be a chain reaction. And they could figure the effects. Within minutes after the detonation of Earth's oceans, Venus too would be dead, sterilized by the terrific outrush of heat and radiation; it was doubtful if such a blast would leave any life in the Solar System. Watchers out in the Galaxy, if there were watchers, would record a *stella nova* of unaccountable briefness...

The other mistake the Venusians had made—the psychological one—was probably a mystery to them even now.

Degnan called once more, "Margaret!"

She did not stir; she hardly seemed to breathe. He wanted urgently to see light in her eyes again, see her

face alive once more, if so it be that this were the end. He grasped her shoulders and drew her erect, unresisting.

"Margaret—wake up. It's all over now." That was the truth, one way or another. "Come back to me, Margaret..." He bent to her parted lips. That seemed to rouse her; he felt her lips come alive under the kiss, her body lose its hypnotized rigidity.

He said close to her ear, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I hurt you for nothing."

She sighed deeply. "I'm all right now. It's gone...and you're here...and I know it won't come back any more," she murmured, like a little girl being comforted out of a nightmare.

General Fleming coughed. "Colonel Degnan. Your time is up."

DEGNAN released Margaret and turned away, his face a frozen mask. Did the Over Race's misunderstanding of human mentality go so far that they had imagined he was bluffing. Or had he misjudged the Over Race—were they too capable of the hatred stronger than death, which so often in the human past had led men to go to destruction, if only to take an enemy with them?

He said, "I'm ready," and to Margaret, "Don't worry. It won't be long."

But her face was stricken. She must have sensed something behind the words; or perhaps she remembered and understood something of the message he had tried to send.

Degnan didn't look at her again. The guards flanked him in the open doorway. The General said briskly, relievedly, "We've landed a flier in the street outside. Only a few minutes—"

King, seated on the edge of the General's desk and apparently ab-

sorbed in putting on his watch, looked up abruptly and said, "Wait." Fleming stared at him, opened his mouth; but the deputy from CFHQ gestured imperiously for silence.

Degnan tried to listen, and was hindered by a roaring in his ears. Unsteadily, he put a hand on the jamb of the door, and felt no vibration in the cool wood; and he saw the answer in the others' faces at the same time.

King reached for a phone at his elbow. "Sector Defense... That's right. Give me the Head Coordinator. At once." He snapped a curt question or two, listened, then broke the connection and asked for another, direct to Combined Fleet Headquarters. Waiting, he gazed quizzically at Degnan. "No projectiles have come in for close to three minutes now—and they were coming five or six to the minute. Now, what shall I tell the general staffs?"

General Fleming made an incoherent noise; his eyes darted from King to Degnan and then to Margaret, and his wrinkles, for perhaps the first time in their history, expressed something like fright. He looked on the verge of crossing himself.

Degnan moistened his lips. "They'd better get in touch with Venus right away and discuss surrender terms. The surrender of Venus, that is... The Over Race ought to agree in occupation and destruction of their spawning beds; it isn't in them to set their race above self-preservation. That way they'll be extinct after a generation; and we can get along with the Under Race."

Margaret moved quietly to Degnan's side, and he drew her

against him; but he was bracing himself for the questions that would come as soon as King finished talking to CFHQ. He couldn't answer those questions—not until Earth ships had taken control on Venus and spiked the enemy's guns.

And then—In him was still a cold, dead weight of knowledge: Venus was defeated, but the curse that had been laid on him remained. He was still and forever an outcast from the rest of his victorious kind...

Earth would be grateful; no doubt they would be ready to give anything he asked, perhaps even the right to remain among men. He couldn't do that, though.

Margaret nestled her head against his shoulder, and looked up with the beginning of a smile on her lips. She might smile again, in a world without fear, as she had in that picture on the telescreen... He blotted the thought out.

She said, "It's really over now, isn't it? And we're all right."

Degnan looked away for a moment. She was going to be hurt too, he realized, and the sooner it was over the better. For a moment, just now, he had wondered if she knew...

He said in a low voice, disjointedly, "The end of one thing is the beginning of another. Now that the System is safe for man—before long they'll be building the first ship to go beyond. A long trip, a one-way trip perhaps, for whoever's chosen to go. And I think—"

Her arm tightened about him in a close embrace of possession and understanding. She whispered: "As long as the star ship will carry two..."

THE END

PRESENTING THE AUTHOR



ROBERT ABERNATHY



MY PERSONAL history seems somehow far less interesting than that of the people about whom my stories are written; they live stimulating, if often somewhat nervewracking lives, whereas, I have spent all of 25 years on one planet (though it's much too early to give up hope of seeing a few others someday), have never had any dealings with alien monsters (unless you include Gila monsters), nor even seen a flying disk, strange as that may seem in this day and age.

I was born in Los Angeles, have lived since then in various places between that city and Boston, but have managed to stay long enough in southern Arizona to qualify, if not as an Old Settler, at least as a native. (In Arizona, where everybody comes from somewhere else, a few years make you a native, and when you've been here ten years or more they come asking you for your personal reminiscences of the Earp-Clanton feud.) The weather here is, as everybody knows, the chief attraction; it's wonderful, except when the wind blows and it becomes impossible to tell where the ground leaves off and the air begins.

As for formal education, I have attended the University of Arizona and the Harvard Graduate School, from which I have an M.A. and hope soon to receive a Ph.D.

So far as memory serves, I wrote my first science-fiction story at the age of ten, in school hours when the teacher wasn't looking; it involved a hero and a villain, swooping about in rocket ships and trying to do one another dirt with all manner of obscure radiations, one variety of which was labeled "radio X-rays" (the electromagnetic spectrum was at that time not so much as a cloud on my horizon). That was as far as it went; the plot was as weak as the science. Later efforts, I trust, show improvement in both directions.

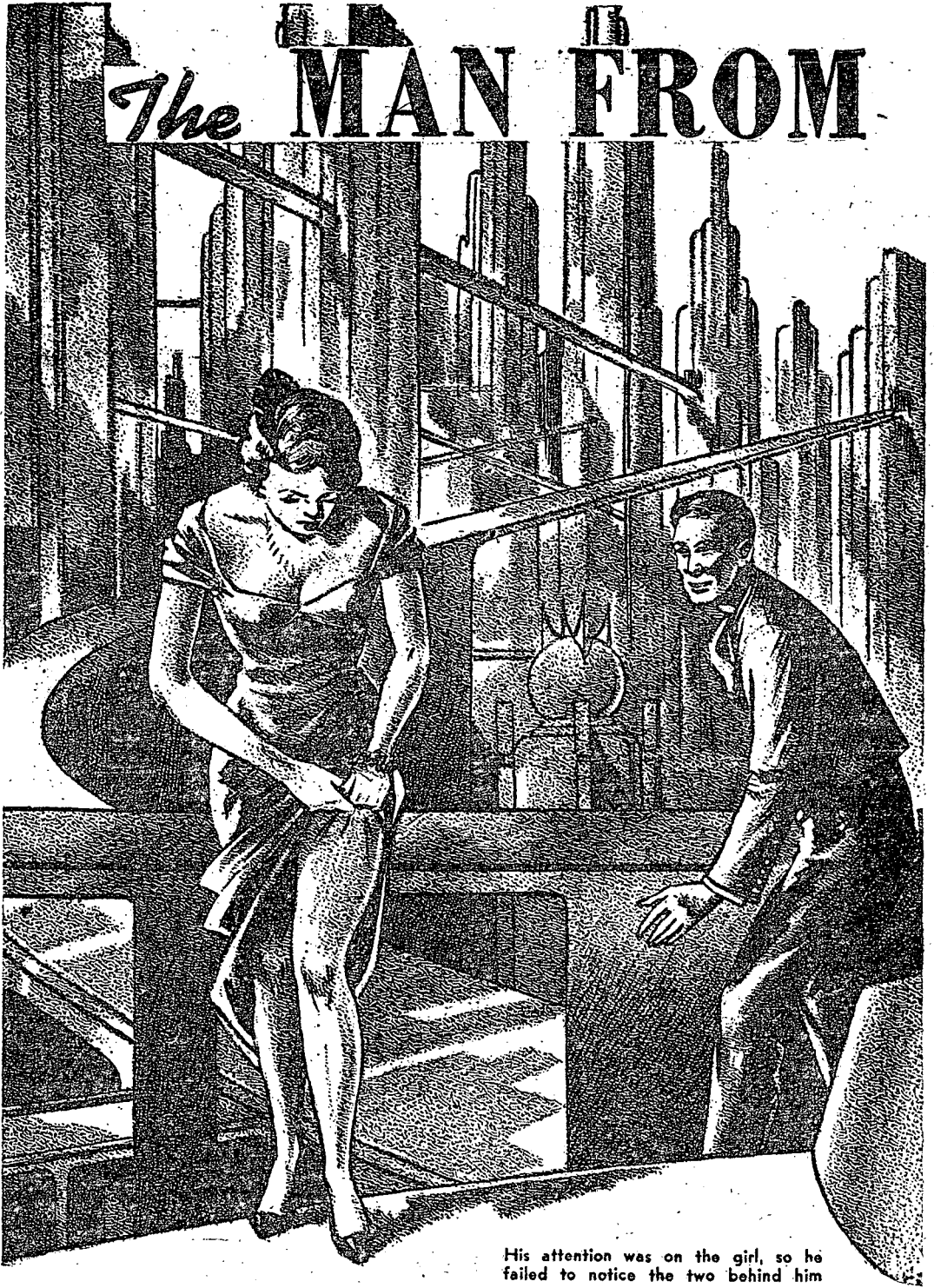
IT IS sometimes discouraging to find how many people refuse to take the science in science-fiction seriously. But one is likely to discover that these are the same people who have no real idea of the nature of science, confusing it, perhaps, with the use of long, queer-sounding words (which may simply be a form of intellectual bullying), or with the building and operation of complicated machinery, or with abstruse mathematics. Actually, the essence of the scientific method is *prediction*: prediction of the unknown on the basis of what is known, i.e. has been reliably observed—and, of course, checking



of prediction by further observation or better still by controlled experiment. Thus the method answers to one of man's oldest practical desires, the wish to know what is going to happen next in order to prepare for the event, or to do something about it, or merely to tell one's friends and neighbors about it in advance and watch their faces when one's "prophecy" comes true—this last being one of the science-fiction writer's principal rewards. For the science-fictionist, insofar as he honestly tries to make predictions from known fact, is behaving as a scientist should. The main difference is that a physicist who says that two masses will attract one another bases his statement on very few and simple facts, so that his prediction has a very high probability of proving correct (though it can never reach 100% certainty; there is no such thing as an "exact" science); but the writer who tries to foresee how people will live, love and pay the grocer in 2500 A.D. is dealing with a mass of hard-to-predict variables—particularly of human behavior—at which the practical scientist throws up his hands in despair. We needn't feel disgraced, then, if our prophetic batting average is low; and even so, once in a while we have the satisfaction of seeing

(Concluded On Page 194)

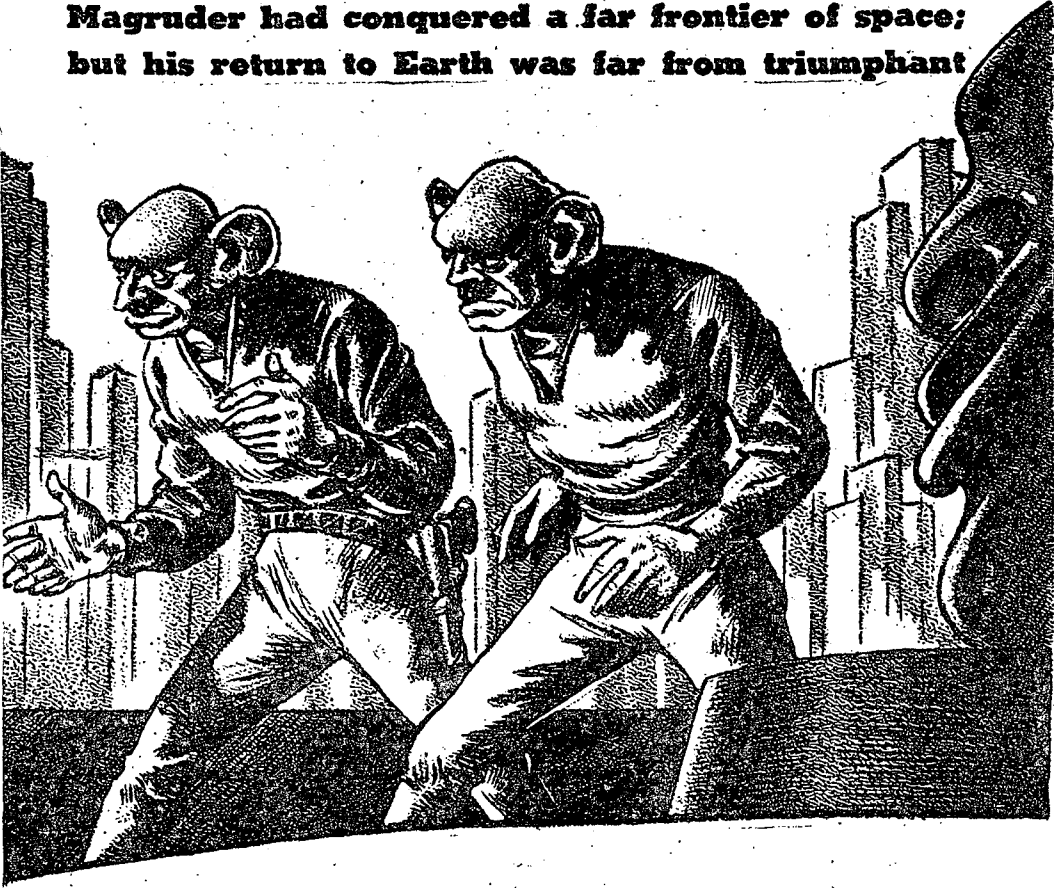
The MAN FROM



His attention was on the girl, so he failed to notice the two behind him

ARBUTUS *By H. B. Hickey*

**Magruder had conquered a far frontier of space;
but his return to Earth was far from triumphant**



“WHO?” THE girl asked.
“Who?”

It's enough to drive a man crazy. Two minutes before her voice is all over the spaceport on the p.a. system, blatting my name, dragging me away from the first good drink in five years. And now that name doesn't get a tinkle from her.

“Magruder,” I said. “Lux Magruder, honey.”

“Oh,” she said. “Oh. The man from

Arbutus!”

“Yeah. Arbutus. The Siberia of the universe. The salt mines, baby.”

Her full red mouth was round with wonder. Her black eyes were round with the same. In fact, she is five feet five of rounded womanhood, luscious womanhood. Her charms are apparent without being obstreperous, her aura inviting without being demanding.

For a full minute I stood there,

realizing what a woman can do to a man's adrenal glands, among others. I forgot all about Paul Stewart, about the reason I had returned to this planet called Earth. And then I remembered. My stomach calmed, my pulse slowed.

"Seven hours quarantine," I said. "Don't tell me I'm finally clear."

"Your clearance just came through." She slid my visa across the wicket. "If you'll hand your gun to the guard you'll be free to leave the port."

A guard had appeared at my elbow. I unbuckled my gun belt and handed him the whole thing. There was a sneak gun under my left armpit, but I wasn't mentioning that to him. When you're working alone and blindly you need an ace in the hole.

I'd have beat it right then, but this baby is still slow-eyed. Definitely inviting. Or at least curious.

Who knows? Maybe it's nothing much with Paul. Maybe in a couple of hours I'll find him. Then he can get someone, and I'll take this one, and we'll have ourselves a time before I take off for Arbutus again.

And maybe, the thought hits me, I can get some information. She is working Circle Seven window, and Circle Seven handles all flights to the outermost ring.

The spaceport was a mad bustle, a scurrying of travellers from all points of the galaxy. Every window had a line before it. But not Circle Seven. Maybe the gal would remember.

"You work this window all the time?" I asked.

"Since I've been here."

"A tall, dark fellow. Shoulders a yard wide. Homelier than I am. Acts surly as hell, but when he smiles you know it's another guy. His name is Paul Stewart."

Another name that didn't get a tinkle. She was shaking her pretty head. "Should I know him?"

"Six months ago," I said, and I had a desperate feeling. "From Arbutus."

"I'm only here five months," she said. "I'm sorry."

AND SHE was sorry. I could tell it. There was something there that said she wished she could help me. Five years without a woman's smile! And this smile was more than friendly.

"Skip it, honey." I started to turn away, changed my mind. "How would I go about tracing him?"

"Immigration office, I suppose. But—well, it would depend on how helpful they felt."

Yeah. And they wouldn't be inclined to help anyone from Arbutus. I'd had a hunch that this was going to be that way. The hunch was getting stronger by the second.

You can't live the way I've lived without being able to smell trouble a long way off. Not in the places I've been. I'd smelled this all the way to Arbutus. It was a stink now.

A Venusian drifted up to the window, his green skin glowing. Seven feet tall and with that musty dampness they all carry. His voice gurred like a pigeon's. Information.

"Window four," the gal told him. He drifted off and she raised her voice. "Mr. Magruder!"

I came back. "I'm sorry," she said. "Awfully sorry."

That was sorrier than she had to be. And she was smiling again. Lord, she was beautiful! Hair as black and soft as an Arbutus night, a skin that Ish-tar would have envied.

"I'll give you a chance to make it up to me," I grinned. "When do you get through?"

"Six o'clock." She wasn't even

playing hard to get. "I live at 100 Neptune Drive."

"Pick you up here. Side gate. Six sharp." I had four hours. I'd make it easy. Then I remembered. "Say, what's your name?"

"Rina," she said. "Rina Tyrell. What's Arbutus like, Mr. Magruder?"

"Lux," I told her. "And I'll describe it later. With gestures."

She laughed, and clicked the switch on a transiphone she'd been fiddling with all the while we were talking. It was a lovely laugh.

JUMPY, I was jumpy as the devil. Here I was, thinking of that laugh as I strolled along the unfamiliar green of Earth, and all of a sudden I got the notion I was being followed.

New York was much the same, full of glittering stores. I paused at a window and sneaked a look behind me. Nothing. People scurrying. A blonde pulling her stocking tighter on a shapely leg.

I shrugged. I had to get to Eddie Beer's place. Eddie was the man who'd know. He'd be the first anyone from Arbutus would go to see. I hailed a cab and gave the driver Eddie's address.

But when we got there I didn't get out. Something was wrong. I tapped at the glass partition and the driver turned around.

"Wrong place, buddy," I said.

"Right place," he grunted. "This is the address you gave me."

"They must've moved. Trilium Incorporated."

"Can you read, pal? Look at the sign."

I looked at the sign. It was in letters thirty feet high. They glittered like gold, real gold. The building was a needle, threading its way two hundred stories into the air.

It should have been a loft building,

with Eddie's office on the second floor. But it wasn't.

Things had changed, all right. I hit the first receptionist on the hundredth floor. And five years ago there hadn't even been a girl to answer a phone!

"Eddie Beers? You mean Mr. Beers?"

I meant *Mr. Beers*. By the time I got to his fifth secretary, they had *me* calling him *Mister*.

And finally I was in his office. It was only fifty feet long, with panelled walls and a rug with a nap to my knees. The desk was the stage of a theater, and behind it sat Eddie.

Not the same Eddie I'd known. He was fat now, and his extra chins flowed over a collar of lustrous silk. His tie was a work of art, not a splatter of gravy spots.

But his eyes were still the same, bright and hard and shrewd. He got up smiling happily.

"Lux! How are you, boy?"

I ignored the question, I ignored his out-thrust hand.

"I had no idea," I said. "None of us had any idea. A thousand of us, digging that damn trilium out there like slaves, grubbing like moles in a hundred and thirty degrees! A thousand of us, putting in five years in a place so damn far and hard to get to that you can't even get live pilots to ferry the stuff out! And *this* is what you did with our work?"

It was dramatic, but untrue. The first year had been hell. But every one of us was an engineer, and a damn good one. If a robot pilot can guide an ore carrier, a robot machine can dig trilium. Four years we'd spent hunting and building and fighting the giant lizards of Arbutus. But Eddie didn't know that.

"Take it easy, Lux," Eddie said. "This place is as much yours as mine."

"But they bow when you come in."

"They'll bow for you too. Listen, Lux, this is Earth. It takes flash. Trilium is big money. I cornered the market, got a monopoly. I let them know how big Trilium Incorporated is, and they came to me. Now it's transport, and atomic plants, and foodstuffs, and communications."

He hit the desk a whack. "By God, when Eddie Beers sneezes now, the Supreme Council says *gesundheit!*"

I SHOOK my head. "We had no idea. We took the risks, you were to handle this end. And for years of living hell we were to have ourselves a stake. Just a nice fat nest egg, that's all we wanted."

"Small time!" he barked. "You're all millionaires now. And you've got the nerve to complain!"

"It's the shock," I said.

"Yeah. That was always the trouble with you men. Impractical, dreamers, looking for a fight always. That's why you were in a jam, facing liquidation or exile. Irreconcilables, irredentists, irresponsibles."

"Anything beginning with 'ir-,' I agreed. "Anybody who wouldn't fit into their neat, orderly, mass production society. Anybody with guts, with life."

"Nuts! Now you can be a big man."

A big man. The phrase was nauseating. We had wanted to be men. In a world gone routine and cut and dried and dull, we had wanted to be men, individuals.

So we had faced liquidation or exile. And a thousand of us had taken exile. We had picked Arbutus, an unknown planet, too far for communication, beyond the deadliest hail of asteroids in the universe.

Eddie Beers had been just a small operator, running a single freighter

to Mars. He'd heard about Arbutus, heard a single rumor of trilium. So we had made a deal with him. We'd trusted him.

"Why didn't you write?" I demanded.

"Too busy. Besides, you wouldn't have understood."

He waved a twelve inch cigar. "You don't like it, I'll buy you out."

"We'll discuss that tomorrow," I said. "But first, where's Paul Stewart?"

He shrugged. "How should I know?"

"He'd come here first."

"Sure. He came here. Six months ago. With the same talk you give me. I bought him out. Cash." He laughed bitterly. "None of you could ever handle money. He probably drank himself to death."

There were a lot of things about us Eddie didn't know. About the homes we'd built on Arbutus, about the research we'd done. We'd developed a few things it would have turned the Supreme Council's hair gray to hear about. But I didn't say that.

"Paul would write to me," I said. "When Johnson and Groves and the others didn't write we were surprised, but it didn't matter. But Paul would write."

"They're all the same. Walk out of here with a fortune apiece and their own families don't hear from them."

"Maybe the others. Not Paul Stewart. Something's happened to him."

"Bah! The d.t.'s."

I was going to hit him but he ducked back behind the desk. He waved a placating hand.

"All right, Lux. I'll find him for you. Nobody goes unaccounted for now. I've got connections. One word and the right files will open up. See

me tomorrow and I'll give you the dope."

I WAS DISMISSED. Just like that. Boiling mad, I stalked out. But I knew it was best to let Eddie handle it. Sure, I could go to police. But then the red tape would begin.

Who're you? Why do you want to know? State your business. Show your papers. From Arbutus? One of the irreconcilables, eh? Probably a plot. Better psyche this guy. Grab him! *Grab him!*

But my best friend. My only friend. Paul Stewart. I had to find him. He was in trouble, or worse. Johnson, Groves, the others who'd gone back. And now Paul.

Something stank to high heaven and I was getting badly worried about it. Inside me, the voice whispered that the smell would get worse within twenty-four hours. Men like Paul and myself couldn't get along in this bookkeeper's world.

And this bookkeeper's world would have no mercy on us. We were just numbers, digits, and if we didn't add up we were erased.

But what could I do? Nothing. I had to give Eddie Beers his full twenty-four hours. And then... I slapped myself under the left armpit. The gun was still there.

In the meantime, I had a date. Might as well keep it. I cast about for a cruising cab and didn't see one. I decided to walk a way.

And again I had the feeling I was being tailed. I stopped at a store window. People passed by. Nobody looked at me twice. A redhead, tall and horsy, was checking her makeup. That was all.

Late afternoon and dusk falling on a crisp autumn day. A good time to think pleasant thoughts as I walked along. Rina Tyrell was a pleasant thought.

She was such a pleasant thought that I became oblivious to my surroundings. I was asleep on my feet. When I finally realized that I was being tailed it was too late to duck.

I'd wandered into a dead-end section. Old and rotting houses on both sides of the street. Not a refuge in sight.

I spun around on my feet, thoroughly awake now, and caught them flatfooted. Four of them! A couple of Martians and a pair of the green Venusians. Between them there'd be little to choose. They'd be hopped up on *giru* and would laugh while they killed me.

Like a scared rabbit, I ran. Like a rabbit, but carrying a tiger's fang. While I ran I clawed my jumper open and got the sneak gun out.

They were shooting now. Flashes of fire lanced past me. Pellets hit buildings and flared into splashes of living flame. If a pellet hit me I was dead. And their aim was narrowing down!

That was when I came around again. The gun in my hand was small but it was mighty. One of the gadgets we'd invented up on Arbutus, and a handy one.

Too many of them to try to take one by one, so I aimed low and let loose. A huge chunk of the street erupted in their faces. One of them screamed.

Only fifty yards separated us and I was back over those yards in seconds. I'd fooled them once, I'd do it again. I'd catch them while they were still stunned.

Through a cloud of settling dust I hurtled. The Venusian who'd screamed was dead. So was the other one. Green blood was thick around them.

One of the Martians was dying, his head cracked by a chunk of flying concrete. But the other Martian

was alive. Dazed, but still alive.

He was still holding his gun and I swiped it out of his hand. He started to come out of his befuddlement and I smashed him in the face and knocked him down. Then I got my hands on his skinny throat and hauled him to his feet.

"Paul Stewart!" I snapped. "What happened to him?"

He was so full of *giru* that I might as well have been talking to a zombie. His face was white, his colorless eyes looking straight out of this world. I had to try something else.

"Your boss! Who sent you to kill me?"

No answer. I hit him again, two fast and jolting punches to the pit of his stomach. Maybe it would snap him out of it. But it didn't. It only got him out of my hands for a second.

Before I could get him again, his own taloned hands ripped across his throat. Blood spurted like a geyser. It was over in no time.

These hadn't been punks; but of the assassin profession. It was kill or die, no quarter asked or given. I'd run into them before on their own home grounds and come out ahead. This one had beaten me.

Feet clattered suddenly and I looked up. Someone running, someone tall. A Venusian. I started after him and a siren wailed, rose to a shriek as it drew near. Police! I had to get out of there.

"SPACEPORT" I told the cab driver as I settled back.

It was a good thirty blocks from the fight, but luckily I was in fine shape. I wasn't even breathing hard after the run. The driver hadn't given me a second look as I got in.

So now I had something to go on. They'd tried to get me. Someone was after my scalp. They'd probably

got Paul's and the rest. Anyone from Arbutus was a dead duck the minute he landed. But why?

While I smoked and pondered that, the driver turned on the radio. Music filled the cab. I shut it out of my mind while I figured this out. Rina Tyrell could wait. I had to get to Eddie Beers.

I leaned forward to tell the driver to stop somewhere so I could look up an address. And just then the music stopped. A hard, fast voice took over.

"Attention! All police personnel, all citizens! Wanted for multiple murder, Lux Magruder! I repeat: Lux Magruder! Carries a visa from Arbutus. Six feet one inch, one hundred and ninety pounds. Blond hair, grey eyes."

He went over it again, then once more. An exact description. Everyone with a radio on was hearing it.

The spaceport was definitely out now. Too many people around. But Eddie Beers was out too. He was my reference for the visa. They'd be sure to check him.

Where could I go? Where? I had to hole up until I could get to Eddie. But where? The answer hit me like a sledge.

"Change that address to 100 Neptune Drive," I told the driver.

"Okay." He didn't even turn around. My heart went back to where it belonged.

When we pulled up to the building, I slid a bill past the window before the cab stopped rolling. I was out and with my back to him so quick he never saw my face.

The address was a swank apartment house, too swank for a working girl. Unless the civil service had upped its wages. But the wonderful thing about the place was its lack of activity.

I checked the mailboxes until I

found her apartment number, 207. Nobody passed me while I was looking. Nobody passed me as I walked into the lobby.

The lobby door was locked. I went back and rang a fourth floor bell and waited. In a few moments a woman's voice came through the tube. "Who's there?"

"Me, honey," I said. The buzzer buzzed and I opened the door and walked on in. That was easy.

Rina's door was that easy, too. It was locked, but there was a space between the door and the strip of molding. I got a knife blade in there and twisted. When I was inside, I locked the door behind me.

MY FEET were up on a coffee table when she came in. Her mouth opened and snapped shut before she could let out a yelp. When she opened it again I shut it by putting my own over it.

"An hour," she said when I let her go. "I waited an hour."

"Couldn't help it. You're not sore?"

"Not too sore," she said.

And she didn't seem to be. She didn't even ask how I got in. I couldn't figure her out. Looking at her, listening to her talk, I knew she wasn't the kind. But when I wanted to kiss her again she came right to my arms. Temporarily, I forgot my troubles.

"Now," she said, breaking the clinch, "I'll put on something more domestic and get some dinner."

"Don't tell me you can cook, too!"

She laughed at that and gave me a pat on the cheek. Then she stepped around me and went into the bedroom. The door shut behind her.

I waited a half minute and tiptoed after her. I put my ear to the keyhole. She was talking to someone on the transiphone.

"He's here! In my apartment! Yes, as quickly as you can."

There would have been more, but I was inside that bedroom so fast she didn't have a chance. She half turned and I grabbed the phone and tore it completely out of the wall. Then I flung her roughly clear over a bed. I helped her to her feet again by lifting a handful of hair.

"You *would* call the cops!" I snarled. "One chance I've got to stay clear and you call the cops! Why didn't you say you'd heard that radio call? I'd have got out."

I wanted to hit her but couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead, I shook her so hard her teeth chattered. Why couldn't I get a single break? Why?

"No," she stuttered. "You don't understand. It wasn't the police. Please, Lux. Please."

I let her go. She was lying and I knew it, but I let loose anyway. And then I thought: what if she isn't lying? What if it wasn't the police?

But who else? Who else would be interested in a man from Arbutus, a man named Lux Magruder?

The answer staggered me. If it weren't the police she'd called, then the whole thing began to make some kind of sense. A simple racket, the oldest in the world. Practised in every port of call in the universe.

And it wasn't the police! Someone was at the door, knocking gently. The police couldn't have made it that fast. And they wouldn't knock gently.

Now the knocking stopped. Rina Tyrell was quiet, her breasts rising and falling with her breathing. I too was quiet. The knocking had stopped. But now a key was sliding into the lock.

I had to get out and get out fast. I didn't know how many would come through that door. I could handle

them; the sneak gun would take care of plenty. But too many would make a fuss.

A fuss meant the cops, and the cops wouldn't give me a chance to talk. Right now the name of Lux Magruder was mud.

I didn't have time to think. I had only to act. The door was no good, but there was a window. Rina yelled something but the window slamming cut it off.

Two stories up and I didn't know what I was jumping into. If it were concrete I was a goner. I took a deep breath and jumped just as the apartment door banged open.

IT WASN'T concrete. It was a flower bed. Somebody's pretty posies took an awful beating as I landed feet first, went into a forward roll and came up running.

If I'd known how much running I was going to do, I'd have worn track shoes. But at least now I knew where I was running to. For the first time since I'd landed, I knew where I was going.

The police were out. I was dead on sight, without a chance to explain. But there was one man who could help me. One man who had the power and the reason.

Maybe Eddie Beers wasn't so far wrong. In a bookkeeper's world there still had to be a head bookkeeper. I knew now with a dreadful certainty that Paul Stewart and the others were gone. But with Eddie's help I'd balance out the account.

I had the page I'd torn out of Rina Tyrell's phone book. Eddie's home address was on that page. Only it wasn't Eddie; it was Edward A. Beers.

And it wasn't too far, just a couple of miles from where I was now. I ran down that dark street, looking for lights, for a cab. And there

wasn't anywhere in sight.

But there was a car. It pulled up to the curb ahead of me and a young fellow got out. He had a box in his hand, a long box. Probably flowers, I thought.

He looked up as I came along and then stepped back to let me get past. Only I didn't go past him.

I hit him right on the button. It was a nice short punch that had all my weight behind it. His feet lifted slightly and then he sagged.

"Sorry, boy," I grunted. Some girl was going to wonder what'd happened to her date.

I dumped him behind a hedge. Then I got the keys from his pocket and went to the car. It was a good many years since I'd driven one of these ground sloths, but I figured I'd manage. If nobody got in my way.

NOBODY DID. The lad would be out for a good half hour, and I had only the couple of miles to drive. I drove it slowly, taking no chances on getting picked up for speeding. And I parked it several blocks from Eddie's place.

He had a nice home. The last time I'd seen Eddie he was living in a hall bedroom, no bath. Now it was a heap of gray stone, with a high wall around it. And a locked gate.

The gate didn't stop me. I went over it. Then a quick run across a tree shaded lawn and I was at the door. I rang four times, sharp and quick.

A light went on in the hall and the door opened. A woman stood there, a blonde in a housekeeper's uniform. She started to get indignant but I cut her off.

"Mr. Beers," I said. "I want to see him. Quick."

She was staring at me, wide eyed, shaking her head. I thought I'd scared her out of her wits.

"He's not home."

"You're—"

No, she wasn't lying. I could see that, and it made me curse the luck of Lux Magruder. One break, and I couldn't get it.

"It's a matter of life and death," I said. "Where can I reach him?"

"His office." She was composed now, more composed than most women would have been. "The entire staff is working late this evening."

Something clicked in the back of my mind as I ran back across the lawn. There was something I should have got, and hadn't. But there was no time to figure it out now.

TRILIUM Incorporated was ablaze with light. That woman hadn't been kidding when she said the entire staff was working. Two hundred floors lit up and it was a pretty sight. I didn't give it a second glance.

At least five people tried to stop me. I walked right on through them, through the words they tossed at me. They must have figured I was someone important because nothing happened.

When I got to the fifth secretary things toughened up. She had her orders and that was that. I wouldn't tell her who I was and what I wanted to see Mr. Beers about. She wouldn't let me through the door she guarded.

What educated people call an impasse, chess players a stalemate. Until the fourth secretary came along. She was a tall redhead with a lovely shape and a face I'd seen at some racetrack. But she was pleasant as could be.

"He was here this afternoon," she said. "I'll okay it."

And within seven seconds I was inside the sanctum sanctorum. Eddie was there, still behind the desk. But now his collar was open and his tie askew. He was yelling orders at a

couple of men as I came in.

One look at me and he waved them away. "Get out!" He waited until the door shut on them.

"Damn!" he yelled at me. "You had to mess things up! Nothing wrong with you men on Arbutus. Not much. One hour on Earth and you already murdered four men!"

"Shut up!" I barked. "You get started on Paul Stewart?"

He glared at me and tossed a sheaf of papers across the desk. Police reports, but just a dossier. Missing report, and nothing written on it. Then a check. A cancelled check for a million bucks.

"Yeah," Eddie rasped. "I paid him off and he went right down and cashed it. And that was the last anyone heard of your pal Paul Stewart. But I'm still working on it."

"You can stop working," I said. "Paul's dead. That's what the mess was about. They tried to get me too."

"But—"

"It starts at Circle Seven window at the spaceport," I cut in. "It starts with a lonely sailor from faraway places, with lots of back pay coming. And with a beautiful girl who gives him the eye, I guess you can take it from there."

"Can you prove it?"

"I got the eye. Too beautiful to be working a window. Lives in a place that costs three times her paycheck. It adds up."

"No. It doesn't add up." And then he pulled the plug on me.

"If it added up they wouldn't try to get you before you had the money, would they?"

No, come to think of it, they wouldn't. Unless they hadn't intended to, and I had merely touched off a premature fuse by catching those killers on my trail. I suggested as much.

"No, Lux." Eddie got up and paced

the floor. "This is big. Bigger than you think. They're after all of us, after Trilium Incorporated. Why do you think we're working tonight?"

I didn't know so he told me. "Because there are only five missing persons who've not been found in the last year. Paul Stewart, Johnson, Groves, and two others. All from Arbutus. And because some of the most important files in this organization are missing!"

"Somebody, Lux, is out to get me!" He took another turn around the desk and suddenly pounded his fist on it. "The girl! The girl! I've got to get her!"

That was it. She might not be more than a cog in a machine, probably wasn't. But she'd know something. I gave Eddie the dope on her and he flicked on a phone.

"Twenty minutes!" he barked after giving her name and address. "I want her here in twenty minutes!"

THEN WE sat and waited. Eddie chewed up a whole cigar and I chewed my nails. I was for calling the police, but Eddie killed the idea. After we had the girl and the information, then I could be cleared.

It wasn't long. It wasn't over fifteen minutes. Eddie Beers had built an efficient machine.

A panel in the wall slid open and there was an elevator behind it. In the elevator were a pair of the tall Venusians, and between them Rina Tyrell. They literally flung her into the room.

"Hello, Baby," I said. And I'd never felt meaner in my life.

But she didn't even look at me. Her eyes were fixed on Eddie Beers. And his eyes were glued on her. His face was white.

If ever a man was scared, it was Eddie Beers. "Miss Stewart." It was a shaky whisper.

"Stewart?" I blurted.

All of a sudden it hit me. A picture Paul Stewart had carried with him. A picture of a kid in pigtails, with enormous eyes. A gawky kid, but she'd grown up. Paul Stewart's sister!

"Get him!" Eddie yelled.

One of the Venusians got me. I was half way to Paul's sister when the seven footer clouted me behind the ear. While the room swam around me, he yanked the gun out of my shoulder holster and then slammed me into a chair.

"Lux," the girl said, and it was almost a sob.

"How does he know you?" I asked. "And why the phony name?"

Eddie was grinning now. "I'll be damned," he murmured to himself. "They put each other right in my lap."

Rina Stewart ignored him. "When Paul vanished, I came to him. He said he'd help, but he didn't even try. I had a hunch that something was wrong, but I couldn't find out what.

"Neither could anyone else. There were the other men who'd disappeared. Nobody knew anything. I had to start somewhere, so I started at the point where anyone from Arbutus had to land."

"Clever," Eddie laughed.

"But what happened to the money?" I said. I needed time to get my senses back.

"They never got any. None of them. Their endorsements on the checks were forged. We couldn't prove it before."

"And you never will," Eddie told her. He looked at the Venusians, who had the pellet guns in their hands.

"All right," Eddie told them. "Right here. Right now."

He wasn't taking any more chances. A million dollars each for a thousand

men. A billion dollars. He'd kill his own mother for that.

"All right," Eddie said.

BANG! The door flew open, catching us all with our bellies sucked in, waiting for death to strike. It was nobody much, just a blonde housekeeper with a brief case in her hand. But she was life itself.

"Mr. Beers," she said. "You forgot this and I thought—"

She was zipping open the case and behind her the redheaded secretary was walking in and Eddie was waving to the secretary to get rid of the housekeeper. And I was realizing now what had clicked in the back of my mind as I went back across Eddie's lawn.

I was remembering a blonde with a shapely leg pulling her stocking up when I looked back over my shoulder. And another time I looked back and there was a horsy redhead examining her face!

What was this? What kind of a crazy nightmare was this?

The blonde had the bag open and what she was taking out was not a sheaf of papers. It was a gun!

The gun went off and one of the Venusians dropped. By that time the redhead had a gun in her hand and she was pointing it at the other Venusian while she kicked the door shut behind her. The green man turned a shade lighter and his gun thudded on the carpet.

Eddie Beers wasn't grinning now. He was a mighty sick man. And mighty confused and scared. I was confused too.

"This is Verna Groves," Rina said. She was pointing at the blonde. "The redhead is Doris Johnson. They once had husbands. Just like I once had a brother named Paul."

I'd never have thought a pretty face could get so hard. But she

wasn't half as hard as the other two. You wait through five years of exile for a man and then a dirty rat kills him.

"We knew it was Beers," Rina said. "But we couldn't prove it. So we took jobs where we could watch him and also the next man to come from Arbutus."

"You can't prove anything now," Eddie protested.

"We don't have to," Verna Groves said. She swung her gun around and fired.

She missed. Just by inches, but she missed. And the Venusian made a grab for her. Everything happened at once.

I tripped the Venusian and kicked him in the face as he went down. Then the Johnson gal's gun went off and the Venusian was dead. But it had given Eddie a chance to yank open a drawer.

HE MADE his play and he almost succeeded. Mrs. Johnson died without knowing what had hit her. And he would have got Mrs. Groves too. But that was where I stepped in.

I came around the side of the desk and I hit Eddie Beers with all the strength I had. His head jerked and his eyes went up until there was nothing but whites showing.

I hit him twice more but the punches were wasted. The first one had broken his neck. It was too easy a death for Eddie Beers, but there wouldn't have been anything bad enough.

Now there was screaming out beyond the office door. Women shrieking and yelling. A minute longer and there'd be cops like flies around here.

And no matter what I tried to say, they'd never believe me. I was just the boy from the wrong side of the tracks. And besides, there just

wasn't enough evidence to clear me.

"The elevator," Rina said. "He had a private entrance."

He had more than that. He had a car down there, a car that could zoom up the long ramp without even straining. But after we were out. What then?

"The spaceport," Rina told me.

"But I can't clear! Without papers I can't get the ship."

"You've had papers since the moment you landed," Rina said. "I don't know how far we'll get, but we'll get off the ground."

She was a very capable girl. I asked her if she was capable of kissing me. She was. She did.

And then the spaceport loomed ahead. I swung through the main gate and rolled right out onto the field, right alongside the cradle where my ship reposed.

"Papers?" A flight inspector had popped up. I handed them over and he gave them a quick check.

"Okay." Then he did a double take. "Magruder!"

I had to hit him. It was the only way. In the distance we could hear the sirens coming along. We couldn't wait.

AT TWO hundred thousand feet we already had pursuit. But it was just an ordinary patrol job and I didn't even have to step up speed to leave it behind.

At five hundred miles there were three cruisers behind us. Three big babies that could blow me out of the sky. And they could travel! I poured it on all the way and they kept pace.

But they couldn't close the gap. That was enough for me. We could run the rest of the race even as far as I was concerned.

"But when we try to land, they'll get us!" Rina said. Mrs. Groves

looked pretty worried about it, too.

"Let me tell you about the three moons of Arbutus," I said. "But first, kiss me again."

Mrs. Groves looked the other way while Rina did just that. I could imagine this going on of Arbutus evenings, and the prospect didn't displease.

There was room for women on Arbutus, women who could take the ruggedness along with the beauty of it. I hadn't thought so before, but I hadn't known Rina before.

But first we'd have to clear up a few things. Once and for all the men of Arbutus would have to be safe from the bookkeepers. As soon as we cleared the last asteroid field, I turned on my phone.

"Magruder," I said. "Magruder coming in."

"So what?" a jaded voice answered. I laughed. Close to home.

"So three big boys would like to stop me."

"What do you know?" the voice murmured. "Where are they?"

"Right on my tail."

"Righto," the voice said.

Arbutus was right below us now, coming out of the blackness. There were purple clouds above it, and below the purple were red and green. A lovely sight.

And then out of the clouds a pair of long, slender ships. I watched them come on. They dipped once and then they were past me.

There was a flash that lit the sky for a thousand miles. And then the long ships were coming back again. This time I dipped.

"The beginning of the end for the bookkeepers," I said. Beside me Rina nodded.

"The beginning for us," she said.

I came into a long glide over the beautiful hills and valleys of Arbutus.

CYBERNETICS—IN REVERSE!



By Carter T. Wainwright



THIS ONE is too good to keep! By now everyone is conscious of the new science of cybernetics which deals with the relation between biology and physics, between brains and thinking machines. *Fantastic Adventures* recently ran a story which dealt with the efforts of scientists to create robot mechanisms of tubes and machines which would simulate living things. The whole subject is hot! The boys in the field are hepped up by the very thought.

Cyberneticists figure that the day will come when they can build robots that will be almost human. Now it comes out that the boys in the biology labs are trying to do the inverse. They're trying to invert the process! They're making biological specimens act like machines.

In Israel, at the Weismann Institute, scientists have been experimenting with certain types of synthetic rubber which they intend to convert into an engine which behaves much like a human muscle. The

synthetic rubber has the property of expanding in an acid and contracting in an alkaline or basic solution. Muscle tissues behave similarly.

By immersing this synthetic rubbery material in a solution whose balance can be changed from acidic to basic alternately, it will expand and contract. This expansion and contraction can be harnessed to some sort of a rod, in the manner of a connecting rod. Presto, you have an engine, a biological one at that, operating a mechanical device!

This is just one more step in the direction of robotics. That thin tenuous link between living and non-living matter is being made thinner. The time is coming when the robot will be a reality.

"Buy our muscles," the ads scream, "we make the biggest fastest and strongest. Buy Ever-Flex muscles! They last a lifetime. (Signed) The Mechanical Muscle Company of America....!"

* * *

SUN-STUFF



By H. R. Stanton



WE WERE doing routine patrol work a good quarter of a light year beyond the System edge. It was dry and monotonous, the sameness of interstellar space a thousand times more boring than the flatness of the seas that the ancients used to complain about.

Instruments were on and maybe that's why we weren't as alert as we should have been. We relied on them, but the Optic can't be compared with a good pair of eyes. Anyhow we didn't see the Body until it was quite close, a matter of two or three million miles at least.

I happened to glance out of the port when I saw the piece of radiant matter. For a moment I thought we were near a sun, but that couldn't be. Our instruments would have registered such a huge mass even if our eyes didn't.

Electron-scopes showed it to be a small—a few hundred feet in diameter—piece of radiant matter at a very high temperature. We were puzzled by the phenomenon. You don't find small pieces of a sun floating around space, and it was clear that the surface temperature of the object was about ten thousand degrees.

We got as close as we dared—about a half a million miles, and the radiation was intense. We dared not go nearer but we watched it clearly through suitable filters

and through the 'scope.

"That thing is a ship!" I cried out, "a lousy stinking space ship!"

A half dozen voices echoed me. And it was just that. In spite of its being a huge radiant mass of gas, it was clearly and distinctly a vessel of some kind.

Before I could say or do anything, Fenwick, the communications man, touched the trip and launched a bomb at the stranger. Seven seconds later it struck—it was an ultra-wave type—and the vessel literally disappeared into blinding radiations all up and down the spectrum. We burnt out several spectros on it. It was to be expected. What else can happen when two atomic bombs strike each other?

I waved the System immediately after confining Fenwick. The cameras took down the whole story and so that's why we're here. We destroyed a ship full of some kind of life from God knows where. That we did so is no tribute to us. Evidently the stranger didn't expect to find warfare anywhere.

So we'll sit here and patrol and wait hoping—did I say hoping?—that we meet another. This time we won't hurl any atomics without waiting. And then maybe we won't have a chance to either hurl or wait. But we'll wait....

* * *

ALL ELSE IS

by E. K. Jarvis

Nobody quarrels particularly with the idea that the dead turn to dust. But what if it starts to happen *BEFORE* you die ?

THEY HAD taken the cover off the target box preparatory to making a new run and the beam from the cyclotron was spurting into the air. Through the periscope in the control room, the beam looked like a death ray. In the control room, graduate research assistant Nick Zehr waited for Ed Freuhoff's entrance into the chamber that housed the cyclotron. A frown puckered Nick's forehead. In this place of transition, in this place of hurtling change, a frown was no new sight. Every man who worked here habitually wore one. But Nick Zehr's frown was something special.

Once before he had seen this thing happen, when the target box was disconnected and the beam was spurting into the air, and he had simply refused to believe his eyes. Even in this place of high magic where a new world was in the making—or an old one being destroyed—even in this place where almost anything might happen, there were limits to what one was willing to believe he had seen. Pink elephants, yes. Green diamonds, yes. But this—No!

Freuhoff entered the operating

chamber. In the control room, Nick Zehr, aware of the big man's entrance, glued his eyes to the periscope and held his breath.

Freuhoff shambled as he walked. Slow of speech and slow of movement, he looked a little like an ape that had decided to become a man and then had changed his mind about the whole business when he discovered what being a man meant—but could not quite make up his mind to go back to apehood again. Not too keen, not too alert, what Freuhoff lacked in native intelligence, he made up by plodding work. Day and night, the man worked.

He walked across the operating chamber. As he moved past the purple beam from the cyclotron, the beam curved in an arc and snapped at his back.

In the control room, Nick Zehr froze.

The beam didn't touch Freuhoff. It snapped out behind him and seemed to follow him from the space of inches. When he started to turn his head, it promptly snapped back into its normal position. By the time he got his head around far enough to see it, the beam was again a purple

DUST



Right before their startled eyes, he disintegrated into a golden dust and blew away

glow of ionized air exploding outward from the open target box.

In the control room Nick Zehr said, "This beats the hell out of me!" There was shock and surprise and wonder and awe in his words. And in him was fear.

"The beam snapped at him. But when he turned around to look at it, it jumped back into place."

This was the impression he had gotten. The beam seemed to have taken intelligent action, whether to strike at Freuhoff or to examine him, out of curiosity, Nick Zehr couldn't determine.

Nor could he understand how the beam *could* take intelligent action. The glow was simple ionization, the beam itself was composed of accelerated particles. Neither the beam nor any part of it was intelligent. Not if man really knew anything about the universe! Therefore the beam could not, like a turtle, become curious about a man and stick its head out from under its shell for another look, jerking back under the shell when it was about to be caught in the act of looking.

Nick Zehr shivered and a cold wave seemed to pass over his body. He had seen the beam lick at Freuhoff, not once but twice! What did it mean? Here in this laboratory they were exploring the fringes of the universe. This cyclotron had been part of the Manhattan Project, it had helped produce the hell that had exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki: the atom bomb. But the bomb was not important, not really. At best, it could only be considered a gadget, important only in the fact that it was a landmark on the new voyage of discovery, a signboard pointing the way to new lands that lay afar, a compass to guide a new Columbus. Compared to the things that might follow it, the atom bomb

was about as important and breathtaking as the operation of a mechanical cigarette lighter, the scrape of steel on flint.

The beam licking at Freuhoff could mean anything. Or nothing. But one thing was certain—Ed Freuhoff and everybody else who worked this lab, had to be warned. Nick Zehr reached for the toggle switch on the squawk box, but before his fingers reached it, the telephone buzzed on his desk. He picked up the telephone—and forgot all about Freuhoff and the erratic purple beam spurting from the cyclotron.

HIS WIFE'S voice sounded in his ear. "Nick! Nick! Come home quickly! Oh, Nick—" The voice was suddenly muffled and choked. "Something terrible is happening! Nick—" A clatter came over the wire. Then silence.

"Nancy, what on earth is wrong with you?"

No answer. The line hummed softly to itself, a chorus of drowsy elfin voices humming unknown songs.

"Nancy!" His voice was a shout echoing through the control room. Frantically he jiggled the receiver on the hook. "Nancy! Nancy! Operator, what's wrong with this connection? You cut me off! Operator!"

"I'll check the connection for you," came the cool voice of the operator. The receiver clicked and hummed. "The connection is all right, sir. The trouble seems to be at the other end; the receiver is off the hook."

"Nancy!" Nick Zehr screamed.

There was no answer.

"Shall I try again for you?" the operator asked.

"No. No. I'll go see." He flung the telephone back on its cradle and paused just long enough on his way out to yell at Ray Schmidt to take

over the control panel. Nick's shift was almost over anyhow and Schmidt was just coming on duty.

Nick and Nancy Zehr lived in an efficiency apartment with a pull-down bed. They considered themselves lucky to have even that. Both worked, he as a graduate assistant while he completed the dissertation for his Ph. D., Nancy as a lab assistant in the biology department. As members of the staff of Gilbert University, both enjoyed their work and the way they lived. Until now, there had been no shadow between them and nothing had ever threatened the even tenor of their life together. He could not begin to guess what might have happened to Nancy to force her desperate call to him. "Something terrible is happening!" Her words rang in his ears. He tried to imagine what might have happened to her but his imagination failed him.

Their apartment was on the third floor of a 30-unit building. He almost ran the wheels off his ancient jalopy reaching it. The thought had come to him that perhaps the building might be on fire, but when he reached it he saw with relief that there was no sign of smoke. So far as he could tell, everything was normal in the building. He went up the stairs three at a time.

As he went by on the run, Mrs. Keeney was bringing her baby buggy out of her apartment. She stared at him as if wondering what on earth was the matter. Fuller, the musician, was practicing on his violin. In one of the apartments a child was yelling and in another a dog was barking. The smell of hamburger being fried with onions was in the air. The building, the people, the sounds, even the smells, were normal. In this place where completely sane people led completely sane lives, what could

have happened to Nancy?

Unlocking the door, he yelled for her.

There was no answer.

The room, he thought, was strangely full of dust. It struck in his throat, threatening to choke him, and he coughed. He expected to find his wife slumped down by the telephone in the dressing alcove just off the bathroom. She wasn't there. The bathroom door was open, revealing a tub half filled with soapy water. The telephone, uttering burping squawks, hung from the top of the dresser. Dust covered the floor, dust hung in the air. It spurted up around his feet as he moved. Choking, he opened a window. "Nancy!" he screamed.

The echo of his own voice answered him.

CHAPTER II

HIS WIFE was not in the apartment. He ran into the hall, hoping to find someone who might have seen her. Mrs. Keeney was down at the far end of the hall, waiting patiently for the self-service elevator.

"Mr. Zehr, is something wrong?"

"Have you seen Mrs. Zehr?"

"No. No, I haven't." The elevator arrived. She began automatically to open the doors. The sound of Fuller's violin caught Nick's ears. He knocked on the musician's door. Fuller, in his socks and shirt sleeves, said: "Hello, Zehr. What? No, I haven't seen her." He called over his shoulder. "Honey, have you seen Mrs. Zehr?"

Mrs. Fuller was a bosomy blonde, calendar type. No, she hadn't seen Mrs. Zehr. Was anything wrong?

"I don't know," he admitted. He explained what had happened. They followed him back to his apartment. "Dinner's cooking," Mrs. Fuller said, pointing to the electric roaster in

the kitchenette. "Maybe she stepped out for a salad or for a dessert."

"And maybe she didn't. You don't scream that something terrible is happening and then go trotting off to get a dessert for dinner."

"Maybe—" Mrs. Fuller's breast heaved at the thought. "Maybe—well—maybe she was attacked."

"She wouldn't call up about it," her husband said. He coughed. "Where the hell did all this dust come from, Zehr?"

"I don't know and don't give a damn."

"You better call the police," Fuller said. "If there's nothing wrong, you won't lose anything."

Notified by radio, the police cruiser needed less than ten minutes to reach the building. A sergeant and a corporal came through the open door of the apartment. "Woman missing?" the sergeant said. His attitude indicated that this was an old story. In his days on the force he had heard hundreds of husbands report missing wives, or vice versa. Usually it meant, that the little woman had overstayed her time in the local gin mill or in the horse parlor or had stepped out with some lad with wavy hair. If the husband was missing, it might mean a sympathetic blonde or it might mean that he had simply gotten sick and tired of looking at the same woman all the time. Men walked away, so did women. Usually nobody really gave a damn, including the other spouse and the police. Sometimes the walkers stop over at their lawyers' office and go on to the divorce court, sometimes they don't even bother about the lawyer.

All of this was included in the sergeant's attitude and in his voice when he said, "Woman missing? Your wife, huh? Let me have the

name and description, please."

His attitude changed a trifle when Nick Zehr told him about the telephone call. "Something was happening to her, huh? She calls you and tells you its happening? But when you get here, she's gone?"

"That's right."

"Did she say what was happening?"

"No."

The sergeant sneezed violently. "Lot of dust in here." He searched the apartment. "Well, she ain't here, that's a cinch. Anything else missing?"

"Not so far as I can tell."

"All of her clothes here?"

Nick searched. "A tan suit seems to be gone but she might have taken it to the cleaners."

"Uh—" The sergeant hesitated. "She—uh—have any boy friends?"

"Listen—"

"Skip it," the sergeant said. "I got to ask questions. Did she have any boy friends?"

"No," Nick said hotly.

THE SERGEANT scratched his head. "Well, she ain't here and I don't see any evidence to prove anything is wrong. Except for all the dust, the place is in order, nothing missing, no sign of a scrap. What kind of a housekeeper was she, to leave all this dust around?"

"She worked. I guess she hadn't had time to clean it up."

"Okay." The sergeant moved toward the door.

"Is this all you're going to do?" Nick demanded.

"I'll report it," the sergeant answered. "Give me a picture of her. We'll put out a description of her. Chances are, she'll turn up herself in an hour or so. If she don't come back by tomorrow, get in touch with

Lieutenant Cogwell, of the Bureau of Missing Persons."

Taking the photograph Nick gave him, he went out the door.

"Well, if this don't beat anything I ever heard of!" Mrs. Fuller said. Her breasts heaved. "Why, she could have been killed—" She broke off quickly, glancing at Nick. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. I'm sure nothing has happened to her. I mean—there may have been somebody she liked—I mean—"

"Madge, you talk too much," her husband said.

Nick took a firm grip on his temper. "She may have run off with another man," he said. "But I don't believe it. She wouldn't have called me. She wouldn't have left her things. There's her purse on the dresser, dinner was cooking, her clothes are here, except for one suit—I just don't believe it. I don't. I don't." He was almost in hysterics.

"She'll turn up all right," Fuller said soothingly "Mix yourself a big drink and eat your dinner. If there's anything we can do to help, give us a call. Come on, Madge." They left.

"I must be calm," Nick told himself. "I'm just worrying about nothing. She stepped out for a little while. Maybe some friend called and asked her to come over, maybe Jean had an accident, or Helen, and they called her. Maybe that's what she meant when she said something terrible had happened—"

Maybe!

By midnight the *maybe* had become a frightened voice whimpering in the far corners of his mind. He had covered the neighborhood, he had called all the hospitals, he had called her boss who had said she had complained of a headache and had left early, he had called her friends and had gotten negative

answers. For the hundredth time, he had searched the apartment.

Under the dresser, he found something he had missed in his previous searches—a ball about a quarter of an inch in diameter, apparently made of brass. It looked a little like a ball bearing except that bearings were usually made of steel. He rolled it in the palm of his hand, noting its extreme lightness. "Must be hollow," he thought.

A knock sounded on the door. Thinking it might be Nancy, he almost broke a leg getting to the door to open it. "Nancy—"

But it wasn't Nancy. It was Ed Freuhoff.

"Hello, Nick. I couldn't sleep." The man seemed dazed or maybe a little drunk. "May I come in? I—" He put his hand on the back of his head and rubbed his scalp as if something pained there. His eyes were a little out of focus and Nick had the impression that Freuhoff looked at him and through him to worlds far away. He was pathetically glad to see Freuhoff, he would have been glad to see the devil himself. "Come in, Ed."

"Thanks. Uh—" The vacant gaze went around the apartment. "Where's Mrs. Zehr?"

"I wish to hell I knew!" Nick brought glasses and whiskey and told the story. Freuhoff's face showed amazement. "That's too bad," he said. He sipped at his drink. His eyes went over the apartment seeking something, came to rest on the little brass ball which Nick had laid on the end table. He picked it up. "What—what is this?"

NICK ZEHR was silent. And cold. The impression of cold seemed to come from some well inside of him. He felt like a blind man who

has been dropped into a den of snakes and dares not move hand or foot for fear he will be struck. "How—how did you happen to come over, Ed?" he blurted out.

Freuhoff's eyes were on the little brass ball. "I—I couldn't sleep," he said. He turned the ball in his fingers. "An odd thing." His voice was thick and heavy. He glanced sideways at Nick and Nick again had the impression he was a blind man in a den of snakes. The wrong move, the wrong word, and anything might happen. He lit a cigarette and drew smoke into his lungs, wondering why he was scared. He had no reason to be afraid of this big ape. Or did he have a reason? How much did he actually know about this man?

"Do you want to keep this?" Freuhoff asked. He turned the ball in his fingers.

"No," Nick answered. He shrugged, forced a casual note into his voice. "I found it on the floor. It's a ball bearing, or something. It isn't important."

He suspected the moment he spoke that he had betrayed himself, that he had somehow overplayed his casual indifference, that, like the blind man among the snakes, he had not been able to sit completely still. He had moved, he had made a sound, the wrong sound.

But he didn't know where he had failed or how or what difference it made. Some center of his brain shouted a warning to him.

The snake struck.

Very gently Freuhoff laid the brass ball back on the end table. His ham-sized fist moved in a short arc and jammed savagely home against the base of Nick Zehr's jaw.

CHAPTER III

NICK ZEHR regained consciousness to find himself lying on the

floor of his apartment. A bronzed face he had never seen before was looking down at him. "Feeling better?" the mouth in the bronze face asked.

Nick sat up. Two men, strangers, were in the room. One was quietly phoning from the dressing nook. The other was looking down at him.

Freuhoff, a slow writhing passing through his heavy body, was lying on the floor. His hands were caught in an odd position behind his back. As Freuhoff twisted trying to get free, Nick caught the glint of steel on the man's wrists. Handcuffs!

"Zehr? Nicholas Zehr?" the bronze-faced man asked.

Nick nodded.

"Joswell. FBI." He held a cupped hand in front of Nick's eyes. A badge was visible in the palm. "FBI," Nick muttered. "What—what do you want?" His eyes went to Freuhoff, sitting up now and staring vacantly at him. "He—he slugged me," he said.

Joswell nodded. "We heard it," he said.

"Heard it?"

"Uh-huh. How would you like to take a little ride?"

"Huh?" The situation was somehow moving too fast for Nick to grasp it. Where had these men come from? What were they doing here? What did they want? "Am I—under arrest?"

The agent pursed his lips. "That depends on how you want it. Right now you are not under arrest. We want to talk to you and we can arrest you for questioning, but actually we don't want to arrest you at all. If it will make you feel any better, you're not the fish we're trying to fry, but you may—or may not—know something important about those fish. So we want to talk to you. Okay?"

"Sure. I guess so. But—my wife—"

Joswell nodded, as if he understood exactly what Nick wanted to say. "We know she's gone. She is one of the people we want to talk to you about."

"Huh? What—?"

"We'll talk later," the agent said.

At headquarters, the agent Joswell took Nick to a plainly furnished office. Freuhoff was taken elsewhere. "Sit down, Mr. Zehr," Joswell said. Nick slid into the chair. "First of all, where is your wife?"

"I wish to hell I knew. I've been going crazy—" Remembering who this man was, he caught himself. "Do you think I know where she is?" Anger sounded in his voice.

With his hands, Joswell made little apologetic gestures. "Take it easy, Zehr. I'm trying to find out something. When did you see her last?"

"This morning. What difference—"

"When did you talk to her last?"

"This afternoon about four-thirty."

"You haven't seen her since this morning, you haven't talked to her since four-thirty?"

"That's right."

"Has she, in the past few months, dropped any hints that she might be leaving?"

"No. What are you getting at?"

"I wish I knew." The agent sighed.

"Has she seemed in any way unusual to you during recent months?"

"No. Look—"

"Take it easy, Mr. Zehr."

"My wife is missing. You seem to know something about her. At any rate, you're damned curious. If you have any information about her, I want it. Right now."

Joswell was silent, the bronze face impassive and quietly sympathetic.

The agent took a deep breath. "I don't know where your wife is. I wish I did. I'm trying to find her. She's a spy."

"**A** WHAT?" Nick Zehr gasped.

The word hit him harder than had Freuhoff's ham-sized fist. As a worker in atomic energy, he knew the care and caution exercised to keep new discoveries from reaching improper sources. There was no secret of the bomb, maybe not even any secrets of the know-how, but there was a chance that new discoveries were being made. Hence—spies. No intelligent person doubted that spies existed. But Nancy was not an enemy agent. He would bet his soul on her innocence. "You're crazy as a loon! You're talking like a man with his head under water! You're—" Rising from the chair, he shook his fist in Joswell's face.

"Take it easy," the agent said. "It is barely possible that I know what I am talking about. For three months, we have been watching your wife. If you thought it strange that we turned up so quickly after Freuhoff slugged you, it might interest you to know that we've had a hidden mike planted in your apartment for the past six weeks. We were in an apartment in the building. When Freuhoff hit you, I thought it was time to move in; otherwise we might lose an important witness."

His tone left no doubt that the identity of that witness was Nick Zehr.

"You've had our apartment wired? You've been spying!"

The bronze face showed traces of an embarrassed red. "Counter-spying is a better word." From his pocket he took a bright object which he laid on the desk. "Did you ever see this before?" he asked.

Nick stared at the object. "Sure. It's one of Nancy's compacts." She loved compacts and bought a new one almost every month, it seemed. But this one she had kept longer than usual. "Where did you get it?"

"From her purse before you regained consciousness," Joswell said. "Did you ever see her set this compact, open, on the end table beside the sofa and read aloud her notes on the day's work?"

Nick nodded. "Many times. But what has that got to do with—"

Joswell shrugged. "It's not a compact, it's a miniature radio transmitter," he said.

"What?" Cold shock waves passed up Nick Zehr's back. "Are you certain of that?"

"Dead certain. It's a short range ultra high frequency transmitter of an unusual design. And if you doubt that it is a transmitter and that it has been used as such, we have recordings of your wife's voice sent out over this gadget." His finger tapped the brilliant vanity case.

Nick Zehr was past the stage at which his emotional equipment could respond to additional shock. Or so he thought. "Who was she communicating with?"

"We don't know," Joswell answered.

"Where did she get this transmitter? I didn't pay much attention to the compact but I thought she had bought it."

"She didn't buy it," the agent said. "She got it from Freuhoff."

"What?" Nick discovered that his emotional equipment was still capable of registering additional shock. "Are you sure about that?"

"Certain. We saw him slip it to her."

Nick was silent. "I find all of this hard to believe," he said.

JOSWELL'S EYES regarded him with sympathy and compassion. "I'm sorry it has to be this way," he said, and meant it.

"Do you know where she is?"

The agent shook his head. He swore fretfully under his breath. "The part I can't understand is how she knew we were going to arrest her."

"What?"

"If she hadn't skipped out on us, we would have arrested her within the next fifteen minutes. Somehow she got wind of it and pulled the neatest, most successful job of skipping I've ever seen. We heard her make a call to you. Then we heard you arrive and start yelling for her. Right then and there I started five men looking for her. Not one of them got a trace of her. Between the time she called you and the time you arrived, she managed to vanish, not only from you but from us."

"It doesn't make sense!" Nick Zehr whispered.

"You weren't the only one looking for her," Joswell said. "Right now I've got a dragnet out over the whole city. By tomorrow, if we don't find her, the net will go out over the whole country."

"What about Freuhoff?" Nick interrupted. "You've got him. He gave her the radio. Ask him where she is."

"We are asking him," the agent answered. "Right this minute he is being asked—" He broke off as a knock sounded on the door. "Come in."

The man who entered glanced at Nick Zehr. Joswell nodded. "Okay, Wilkinson. It's all right to talk. Has he begun to open up yet?"

Wilkinson said, "He has admitted he gave the radio to Mrs. Zehr. That's enough to hang both of them—" Behind him the door was thrust open.

The man who entered had not bothered to knock. "Chief, come quick!" he gasped.

Like a shot out of a gun, Joswell leaped from the chair. He went through the door. The two agents followed him. Nick Zehr brought up the rear. There was something strange about the man who had entered last, he saw, but in the emotional storm already swirling within him he had difficulty in isolating that strangeness. Then he saw what it was.

From head to toes, the man was covered with golden dust.

At a run, Joswell went down the hallway. From an open door ahead of him, a man looked out, beckoning. His face, his clothes, his hands, were covered with golden dust. He was trying to brush it from his clothes, mechanically, his mind obviously entirely on something else. He stepped aside and they passed through the door.

IT WAS a plain room, with four stiff chairs, a high barred window, and a single ceiling light so bright it hurt the eyes—a room such as countless law breakers know, not as a place of torture, but as a room where a prisoner may be kept and grilled until the hours turn into days and the days turn into nightmares.

The bright light shining from the ceiling was hazed with golden dust. The room seemed filled with a fog, this too was dust. Nick Zehr was aware of men coughing and sneezing, felt a familiar tickle grow in his own throat.

Lying on the floor in front of one of the chairs were two shoes. Lying across the chair and on the floor were a shirt and trousers. Dust-covered, the clothing gave the impression of being riddled with some

kind of fast-spreading dry rot so that now it would crumble at a touch.

"What is it, Kilgore?" Joswell said to the man who had beckoned to them from the door.

Kilgore left off the mechanical brushing of his clothes. He pointed to the chair. His voice rasped mechanically, like a robot repeating to its master the things its eyes had seen. "He was sitting in that chair. Suddenly it looked like dust was spurting out all over him." He stopped speaking and licked dry lips with a nervous tongue.

"Go on," Joswell said.

"By God, right in front of my eyes, he turned to dust!" Kilgore blurted out the words. "It looked like he had turned to dust and then somebody had punched the switch on a million little electric fans inside of him. The fans started turning and blew him away. By God, Chief, that's exactly what it looked like!"

CHAPTER IV

ON KILGORE'S face sweat was turning the yellow dust into mud. He rubbed his hands over his cheeks, stared at the smear on his palms. "This damned stuff, Chief, this is Freuhoff—all that's left of him."

"Damn it, that's not humanly possible!" Joswell said and stopped as Nick Zehr spoke without realizing he was speaking.

"But maybe it's inhumanly possible."

Eyes turned toward him as the words left his lips. The room was silent. Again he felt like a blind man in a snake pit. He stood very still, hardly daring to breathe and not daring to move. Yellow dust

swirled through the room. Joswell looked at him. "I was thinking that," the agent said. "I didn't dare say it."

Joswell's face was gray. A vein throbbed visibly in his forehead. His gaze went around the room as if he was looking for something he suspected might be here, yet afraid he would find it. "All the time I've thought we were chasing a bunch of spies trying to crack our atomic set-up. What a mistake that was!"

Outside was the night, the distant honk of a taxicab. Somewhere tires screeched on asphalt. Again Nick Zehr found himself thinking of alien intelligences using human beings to probe the secrets of a world they could not investigate directly. Human robots! Had Freuhoff been such a robot? Had Nancy— He couldn't even think it.

He had loved her, he had held her in his arms, he had lived with her. He knew everything about her. Or he thought he had known everything.

Joswell's eyes searched the room for something invisible, something intangible, something hidden from the senses, for some alien creature present here invisibly. Knots formed at the corners of his jaw. "Kilgore, set a guard on this room. Roust the chemists out of bed and get 'em up here. I want an analysis of this dust. I want this room searched, walls, ceiling, floor, door, chairs, lights. Don't miss a thing. Move!"

Kilgore was gone.

"Wilkinson, bring all the records on Freuhoff to my office. Move."

Wilkinson moved.

Nick Zehr followed Joswell back to the agent's office. "You saw the room, you heard what happened," the agent said. "What do you think?"

"I don't think. I can't think. It's not possible."

"I know it's not possible. But it

happened. Why did Freuhoff come to your apartment?"

"He said he couldn't sleep."

"Why did he slug you?"

"I have no idea. It was completely unexpected."

Joswell's bronze face had a gray pallor. His eyes were hard and cold. "You and he weren't very friendly, were you?"

"As a matter of fact, we weren't. But we weren't unfriendly either."

"Do you have any information that might help?"

"So far as I know—none."

"Why did you say it might be inhumanly possible for a man to be turned to dust?" Joswell's stare was unwinking.

"I had no reason. The thought just popped into my mind."

For a moment Joswell watched him, then the cold eyes were hooded and the gaze was turned away. "Well, there's no use trying to lick this thing in an hour or two. If I get the job done during the rest of my life, I'll figure I'm lucky. Zehr, where do you want to stay, here or at a hotel? We've got some rooms fitted up with bunks here. You can use one of them if you wish."

Apparently he was giving Nick complete freedom of choice. "Can't I go home instead?" Nick asked.

"That's out," the agent answered. "Personally, if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't go back to that apartment for a million dollars—though I'm damned if I can suggest any other place that's much safer."

"I'll stay here," Nick said.

"Good. You'll at least have somebody within calling distance."

JOSWELL personally took Nick to the room he was to occupy. It was fitted with a double-decker bunk. Lying down, Nick sank instantly into

a deep, drugged slumber through which, like phantoms out of a nightmare, writhed the impossible shapes of alien monsters. At ten o'clock the next morning, Nick was back in the agent's office. "Got anything yet?" he asked.

Joswell looked like a man who has not had much sleep. "A lot of nothing," he said. "I've got two chemists at work on that dust. I had three at first but when I told them what the dust was, the third quit on me. I think he figured the day of Judgment was at hand." Joswell shook his head. "I don't know that he's not right. I've been talking to doctors, physicists, chemists, to any scientist who would hold still long enough to listen to me, and they all say there is no known force—ray, radiation, disease, or what have you—that will turn a man into dust within the space of minutes."

"Did you tell them you had seen it happen?"

"Hell, no!" the agent answered. "I'm not likely to tell that to anybody yet. If the story got around that there is something loose in this town that is turning people into dust we'd have the damndest panic on our hands you ever saw. People are already scared, of the atom bomb, of bacteriological warfare, of the next depression, of this, that, and something else. I haven't got anything except this, and I don't know what it is."

From his desk drawer he took a small box. Opened, it revealed a brass ball. "I know what *that* is," Nick said. "I found it under the dresser in my apartment. I didn't know you had brought it with you."

"I didn't."

"No? Then where did you get it?"

"Found it in Freuhoff's clothes."

"The devil! Say he *had* been look-

ing at that just before he slugged me. I got the idea he thought it was important, though I don't know why. Maybe he brought it along."

"And maybe he didn't," the agent mused. He picked up the phone on his desk, gave a number to the switchboard operator.

"That's my number you just called," Nick spoke.

"Uh-huh. I've got a man staked out in your place. He doesn't much like being there, either." The receiver rattled and he spoke rapidly into the mouthpiece. He listened, then hung up. "There's another one of these balls at your place," he said.

"Well—" Nick said. He picked up the little brass ball and held it between his thumb and forefinger. Twist and turn it as he might, he could see no importance that could be attached to it. "I don't know. I don't understand. I—" His voice trailed off. His hunch was that the ball was important. But how? He did not know. "What do you want me to do?" he said.

"There are two things I don't want you to do. One is to go back to your apartment, the other is to go back to your job."

"But—" Nick twisted uncomfortably. There was a thought in his mind, a thought he had been trying to avoid. "My wife—"

Joswell nodded. "I know," he said. His voice dropped a notch. "As I recall it, there was a lot of dust in your apartment."

Nick Zehr was on his feet. "No! No! No!"

"So far as my chemists can tell, it is essentially the same as the dust that came from Freuhoff," Joswell said quietly.

"Do you think that Nancy—" But Nick got no farther. His mind blanked out on him and refused

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to function. He had been trying to avoid this thought, had been trying to avoid it ever since he had seen the dust in the room where Freuhoff had been questioned. He could avoid it no longer.

"Here's a number," Joswell said. "Call it if you think of something."

He scribbled something on a piece of paper. Nick Zehr took it, turned and walked dumbly from the room.

"Keep in touch with me," Joswell said.

WITH JOSWELL'S words lingering in his ears, he walked out of the gray stone Federal building. Nancy—dust. Nancy—gone. Nancy—dead. Why did he want to stay alive if Nancy was gone? There was nothing left, not even his work. He knew enough about the functioning of security to know that he would not be allowed near a radiation laboratory until Joswell had cleared him. Joswell wasn't going to clear him until the agent was sure of his ground. It was not that Joswell suspected him of being a spy—apparently he was convinced of his innocence—but he had been too close to a woman who operated an illegal transmitter for him to be entirely clear of suspicion. Joswell wouldn't take any chances.

Joswell was a badly scared man. He had seen the equivalent of a ghost and he walked in terror. Somewhere in this city there was an alien creature and Joswell knew it. But where? Or was the alien somewhere else, in some other space-time, manipulating his controls across the gulf of chaos? Who knew? Were the people passing along the street, driving automobiles, riding in street cars, were they walking robots controlled by some creature hiding in another space? Not all of them certainly, but perhaps some of them were such robots. Who knew

which was which? Were they real people, controlled by an alien intelligence, or were they imitations of real people? Nick Zehr had always thought his wife was a real woman but now he was not certain. There had always been something mechanical about Freuhoff's actions. Seen in the light of his new knowledge, Nick realized that Freuhoff had always acted as if he was under the control of some other power. But where was this power hiding? And was he in danger from it?

Inside his mind he was aware of groping pressures. Then a voice whispered far away, "I am your friend. I will help you."

"What?" he said automatically. It was in his mind that someone near him had spoken.

"I am the alien," the whisper said.

A shudder passed over Nick Zehr. He jerked his head around to look behind him. He was on the steps of the Federal building. Story on story, the tall structure rose above him. Pigeons fluttered around the roof. A flag drooped languidly in the still mid-morning air. Cars passed on the street, their tires singing against the asphalt. A man was sniping for cigarette butts along the gutter.

The whole scene looked completely commonplace. There was no person and no thing in sight that could have spoken to him. He reached the immediately obvious decision. "I'm nuts," he thought.

"You are not insane," the prompt answer came. "I exist. I am speaking to you."

"Where are you?"

A WILD light had appeared in Nick Zehr's eyes. He began walking along the street. Somewhere ahead of him a police whistle shrilled and traffic moved in response. He

bumped into a woman and got a curt, "Why don't you look where you're going?" and did not hear a word she said. He was listening to the voice speaking to him.

It was a calm, soothing voice. It said, "I am very near you but you cannot see or feel me. You can hear me speak in your mind. That is all."

Nick Zehr stumbled. The police whistle shrilled again, sharp and indignant. Rubber screamed and a horn blared. He caught a glimpse of a bright chromium bumper swerving to avoid him, the face of the frightened and indignant driver glaring at him from behind the wheel. A hand grabbed his shoulder.

"God damn it, are you trying to commit suicide?" It was the traffic cop. "Watch where you're going!"

Without noticing what he was doing, Nick had walked into the flow of traffic. "I'm sorry—"

"What the hell's the matter with ya? Ya drunk?"

"No. I was thinking. I—wasn't noticing."

"Ya better notice! Get on now. And look where you're going!"

Nick crossed the street. He had scarcely heard the policeman. In his mind a far-away voice was screaming. "You idiot! You almost got yourself killed just the minute I established contact!"

Nick walked on. He kept his eyes rigidly to the front. All over his body, the flesh crawled. He had the impression he was being followed, he was being watched. There was a drug store on the corner. Joswell had said to call him if anything happened. Something certainly had happened. He turned into the drug store to call the Federal agent.

"What are you going to do?" the voice snapped at him.

"Uh—I'm going to make a phone

call. It's something I have to do."

"You're going to call that Joswell!" As the agent's name flowed into his mind, there came with it a blast of burning hate.

"No. That is—"

"You fool, I can read your thoughts! You were going to call Joswell and tell him about me."

"I sure as hell am!" Nick thought.

"Try it and see!"

Nick started toward the phone booths at the rear. In mid-stride, he halted. Something seemed to reach into his mind and seize his will. Desperately he tried to move toward the phone booths. His heart beat climbed, he panted from the effort he was exerting but he didn't move an inch closer to the phones. From her cage, a girl cashier stared wonderingly at him.

"Turn around and walk out of here," the voice said.

He found himself turning around and walking out of the drug store. The far-away voice chuckled—the alien gloating over him. "Call a cab," the voice ordered. "That man Joswell is dangerous. He has to be stopped, quickly. Stopping him is your job and you are going to do it."

CHAPTER V

TWENTY minutes after he hailed the cab and gave the address to the driver, the cab stopped in an old section of the city. All during the ride the alien had been silent. Now Nick hoped that somehow contact had been broken.

It was a frail hope. As soon as the car stopped moving, the voice spoke again. "Get out of the cab."

Nick paid the driver. Completely lost, he stared around him. To his left was a warehouse, apparently abandoned. Directly in front of him

was a small stucco house with a *No Trespassing* sign in front of it.

"Go down the alley beside the warehouse and enter by the side door," the voice said. Nick obeyed. "How—how can you speak my language?" he asked.

"I learned it from you," was the reply.

Nick reached the door of the warehouse, rattled the knob in his hands. The door was locked.

"Unlock it," the voice said.

"How?"

"You have the key on your key ring. It's the same as the key to your apartment. It was made that way, in case you or anybody else got curious. An extra key that seemed to fit nothing might have been hard to explain to Joswell, or to somebody like him, but a key to your own apartment needed no explanation."

Nick fitted the key in the lock. The bolt moved back.

"To the basement," he was ordered.

"This is as far as I am going," Nick said. He planted both feet firmly, intending to move no farther. To his surprise he found himself walking down the basement stairs while a shrill voice like the screaming of an angry bird scolded him. "You utter fool! I can force you to obey me. I can block off your conscious mind so that you will never remember you have obeyed me. You are a robot, a slave. I am your master."

Slave! Robot! The words echoed in his mind. He walked into the basement of the warehouse, unlocked a door that seemed to lead into the furnace room. He was not surprised to discover that the key to the cyclotron lab fitted the furnace room door. Nor was he surprised to discover a well-concealed opening that looked to be a part of the wall of

the coal bin across the big room.

He was now in the basement of a small stucco house next door to the warehouse, in what looked to be a completely equipped laboratory.

"Whose lab is this?" he asked.

"Freuhoff's," the answer came. "And yours."

"Mine?" he gasped. "But I've never been here before. I know nothing of this."

"Consciously you know nothing," the voice said. "But you rented this house and the warehouse, under my control, fitted the locks on the doors and set up the equipment here."

"When was this?" he gasped.

"You did it last summer when Nancy went home to visit her mother," the voice said. "Remember, you had a vacation then but you said you couldn't go with her because you were busy at the lab. This is the lab you were working on. Freuhoff joined you later, after you had completed setting up the equipment here. After Freuhoff joined you, he did all the work and you did not come near the place again, until now." Far away a laugh sounded, not a laugh really, but a feeling of mirth flowing into his brain.

His eyes went around the laboratory seeking the laughter.

"There is no point in trying to find me," the voice whispered in his ear. "If you live a thousand years, you will never find me."

"Where are you?" he whispered hoarsely.

"You will never know."

"Are you in this room?"

"Yes."

"Were you in the cab with me?"

"Certainly."

"Were you with me yesterday?"

"I have been with you for over four of your years. I have watched from your eyes, heard from your ears, puz-

zled out the language that you use, studied your emotions and feelings until I know you better than you know yourself."

"Are you matter as we know matter?"

"Perhaps." A cautious note was creeping into the voice.

"Then why can't I see you? Why can't I feel you?"

"For two reasons—because I am hidden, and because I don't want you to see me. In fact, your seeing me would be disastrous for both of us."

Nick Zehr took a deep breath. "Where are you hidden?" he demanded.

"You asked that once before," the answer came. The voice changed. "This is enough talk. There is work to be done."

"What kind of work?"

"We have to stop Joswell. He knows more than he has hinted to you."

"Maybe you have to stop him, but I don't," Nick Zehr thought. The idea flashed across his mind and was instantly gone as he tried to control his thinking. He was too slow. The alien had caught the thought impression. "You will obey orders," the cold voice said. "Or else! Turn the current into that generator."

THE GENERATOR was a complicated apparatus that looked something like a high frequency, high power radio transmitter. "I don't understand this thing," Nick Zehr muttered.

"You ought to understand it: you built it." The alien laughed. "Of course, you have no memories of building it."

If he had done this, what else had he done? He didn't know and couldn't think. "What does it do?"

"It projects control spheres into

the brain of any person I wish to control," the alien explained.

"Control spheres?" Nick Zehr muttered. Something floated up from his subconscious mind, a description of the control spheres, a mental picture of them. He shivered. "The little brass balls," the alien said. "I see some of your memories are becoming conscious. You found two of them. One came from Freuhoff, after he was disintegrated; the other came from your wife."

A hard core of pain throbbed in Nick Zehr's heart. "Don't be concerned about her," the voice said. "You can get another woman, a hundred if you wish. All you have to do is project a control sphere into their minds and they will come to you, under my direction."

"What?" Nick whispered. The potentialities of this thing were horrifying.

"I needed to use your wife for experimental purposes," the voice went on. "She was the only person whom I could seize that I could also observe, regularly, through your eyes. She was the first person I seized by the control spheres. After her came Freuhoff. Also, I wanted to use her to test the effectiveness of the radio transmitter. The transmissions that the agent detected were actually messages to me, from her. It was an experiment, and a mistake. If those transmissions had not been detected, Joswell would never have known I existed."

"These brass balls are actually placed inside a person's brain? How can you do that?"

"They are synthesized there. A mild anaesthetic is also synthesized at the same time so that no pain is felt. Through the spheres I establish direct contact with the brain of the person I wish to seize. He has no

idea that I am controlling him, reading his mind, ordering his actions. In the case of Freuhoff, I went a little wrong somewhere." Worry crept into the voice. "You noticed the beam of the cyclotron flick toward him as he walked past it. Actually the beam was attracted in some unknown way to the control sphere. When he turned his head, the sphere was out of focus and the beam snapped back into place. I don't understand how this happened but in some ways Freuhoff was a failure. He actually succeeded in thinking in a way that I could not detect, though his thinking led him to the wrong conclusion. He thought you were his enemy and he came to your apartment, determined to kill you. This was the wrong conclusion he had reached, that you had caused something to happen to him."

For a moment, Nick Zehr felt a wild sympathy for Ed Freuhoff. How the man must have struggled, first to grasp the idea that something had happened to him, then to find out what had happened, then to do something about it! Actually he was trying to detect the existence of a control sphere inside his brain. "Was that why he slugged me?" he whispered.

"He meant to do more than slug you," the answer came. "Somehow the control sphere that had come from your wife gave him the final clue he needed."

"And you killed him?"

"I disintegrated him, through the control sphere. He was telling the agents too much and he was about to betray his suspicions of you."

"You sound as if you really want to protect me," Nick said.

"I do," the voice answered.

"And these control spheres, I assume that I—" His voice and his

thoughts faltered. "That I—I have one in my brain, too?"

"What do you think?" the answer came.

NICK KNEW what he thought. What else *could* he think? He had been seized, he was a robot, a slave. He did not know how it had happened, only that it *had* happened. Like a sick dog creeping away to die, desperation moved through his mind. Meanwhile his fingers worked at the generator, largely without conscious direction from him. In effect, he seemed to stand off and watch his fingers work, to see himself as another, different person doing violence against his will. He closed switches. The tubes in the generator warmed to life. In the center of a special tube that seemed to be the heart of the apparatus—caught and held in a vortex of radiation that seemed to pour in on it from a separate source—a tiny brass ball began to take shape—a control sphere in the process of synthesization. The voice was silent. The alien seemed to withdraw from him and to concentrate its attention on the functioning of the generator.

What was this alien that rode him like the Old Man of the sea? Where had it come from? Where was it hidden? He did not know. He had imagined that some humans were robots probing his space-time continuum for information to be radiated back to masters located in other universes. He was familiar with the theory of plural universes, of the fourth, and higher, dimension. Perhaps the alien that controlled him came from some such universe.

How could he seek out and find an alien who might be hidden in some lost infinity? How could he destroy such a creature? He did not

know how, all he knew was that there was in him the fierce desire for destruction. This alien had killed Nancy. Between Nick Zehr and the alien there would never be anything except deadly enmity. He kept such thoughts out of his conscious mind but under the surface they boiled with hurricane violence. Hidden below the threshold of perception, the hate in him was as violent as a miniature atom bomb. Freuhoff must have felt something like this, when he detected that something—he probably never knew exactly what—had seized control of him.

As to what would happen to him, eventually, Nick Zehr had no doubts. He would die. Deep in his mind was the knowledge that he wanted to die.

Inside the tube, the brass ball began to grow to proper size. Nick was aware of irritation. The alien was irked, maybe worried. Something had gone wrong somewhere. The ball stopped growing. Held in the vortex out of which it grew, it remained a waiting bronze ball.

"What is it?" Nick whispered.

The alien spoke. "Joswell is not in his office."

How the alien knew this, Nick did not know. Nor was it explained to him. Perhaps a form of telepathy or clairvoyance was involved. "It is best done when the subject is asleep," the alien spoke. "But asleep or awake, I have to know where the subject is."

"And you don't know where Joswell is?"

"No."

"Too bad," Nick said. Inwardly he was thoroughly glad but he kept his gladness, like his hate, below the surface of his mind. Freuhoff must have operated in this manner, keeping his real thoughts and his real feelings well hidden.

"We will have to wait until I can

find him," the alien said.

From behind Nick Zehr came a soft creak, the sound of an opening door. He spun around.

JOSWELL stood in the door. He had a .45 automatic in his hand. Behind Joswell came two other men, both with drawn guns.

"Get your hands up," Joswell said quietly. He came into the room.

"You—you found me?" Nick Zehr whispered.

"We found this, too," Joswell answered. His glance took in the basement laboratory. "We knew this had to exist somewhere and we suspected you knew where. We thought, if we turned you loose, you would lead us to it."

"Me?" Nick said. He saw that Joswell did not understand. Finding him here in this place, Joswell had assumed he had come here of his own free will. Joswell thought him guilty. He was caught here in this lab. No amount of persuasion would ever offset the fact of his being here.

Nick Zehr knew the consequences of being caught here. Years in prison would be the best he could hope for. It was a fate he could not face. Not now. Somewhere in his soul he found the courage to smile. He knew what he was going to do.

"To hell with you!" he said to Joswell. "You haven't got me yet!"

From the workbench he snatched a pair of pliers. With all his strength, he flung them at the agent.

Joswell dodged.

In Nick Zehr's mind the voice of the alien screamed. "Stop it, you fool. You idiot, you will get both of us killed!" He felt the controls in his mind reach for his will.

"You'll never get me alive," he shouted, and flung himself straight at Joswell.

In the lab, a gun thundered. Nick felt the bullet hit him. It was not Joswell who had fired. Joswell wanted him alive, for questioning. It was Wilkinson who pulled the trigger of the gun. The heavy bullet struck him, spun him backwards, knocked him down. Blood spurted from his chest.

In his mind a frantic voice screamed: "You fool! I could have saved you!"

Nick Zehr answered, "To hell with you!" Here in these last few seconds he had discovered the hiding place of the alien. Its identity he did not know but he knew its hiding place and had horrible suspicions of its real nature. "To hell with you! I got you anyhow!"

Joswell was bending over him. "What?" he asked.

"Not me—" Nick Zehr gasped. "Not me who did this, but something else." The feeble gesture of his hand indicated the equipment in the laboratory. "I found him, Joswell." Something of triumph sounded in his voice. "I found him—the alien—and did all I could."

In the back of his mind the raging voice of the alien was shouting at him. It was growing weaker. Nick knew what that meant. He had licked his enemy. If he had to lose his own life doing it, at least the sacrifice was worth while. In his mind a feeling of triumph came, grew stronger.

"I—I finished the job," he whispered to Joswell. Inside of him the feeling of triumph built up to a paen of victory. As he died, a smile formed on his lips.

CHAPTER VI

IN HIS OFFICE, the amazed agent fumbled sheets of paper. The whole record of Nick Zehr was here

before him, complete in every detail. His birth, the names of his parents, his high school and college records, a photostat of his army service record, the circumstances under which he had met and married his wife—everything. It was as complete and as careful a dossier as could be compiled on any man. There was no hint of disloyalty in it.

Reading the record, Joswell reluctantly let go of the idea that Nick Zehr had been a spy. Whatever he was, whatever he had been, he had not been that. Nor had his wife.

Then what was he?

Again and again the agent read over a single sheet of paper. It was the report of the medical examiner giving the results of the autopsy. The examiner had thoughtfully stripped it of its technical language. One line held Joswell's complete attention.

"Subject was revealed to have been suffering from cancer of the brain. Exploration revealed a mass of extraneous brain tissue big enough to have filled a tea cup."

Nick Zehr had worked in a radiation laboratory and cancer was sometimes known to result from exposure to excessive amounts of radiation. There was nothing in the case history to indicate that Nick Zehr had known he had cancer, which proved nothing. Many people do not know they have cancer.

In effect, this cancer, this extraneous growth, could have been the equivalent of an extra brain. It had formed within the other brain, which meant that normal brain cells had begun to multiply excessively. Therefore the growth was abnormal brain tissue, possibly capable of thought, of rationalization, of other activities.

"I wonder—" Joswell thought. In this moment he was very close to

making the discovery that Nick Zehr had made just before he died—the hiding place of the alien. The agent knew nothing of the voice that had spoken to Nick Zehr but he suspected that something inhuman had been involved in this case. Remembering what had happened to Freuhoff, he felt chill waves pass over his body, as if some alien monster from another universe had paused for a moment, opened his brain and peeped in before passing on into the mysterious void that gave it birth.

Rising from his chair, he strode to the window and stood looking out over the roof tops of the city. "He said he had got the job done," he

thought. "Did he deliberately throw himself at me, hoping I would kill him? Was that the way—the only way—he could destroy the thing that seemed to control him?"

Joswell did not know the answer. If it were true, then Nick Zehr had been a brave man, one of the bravest. Dying, he had taken his enemy down to death with him. Somehow or other, Joswell thought that this was the true solution. If it was true, then his job was complete. Thinking this, he, and a lot of other people could sleep sounder of nights. Abruptly, he turned back to his desk to begin the task of writing his report.

THE END

STICKS AND STONES . . .

★

By Jon Barry

★

A FEW MONTHS ago, when the Navy was carrying on violently about its role in a future war, many things were said in the heat of the argument, that could be questioned.

We recall in particular, hearing a wire-recording of a naval officer of some repute, testifying that, in a future war the atomic bomb was grossly over-rated. He said, to illustrate his point, that if you stood at one end of the Washington airport and an atomic bomb was exploded at the other end, you wouldn't be harmed a bit!

It is startling to realize that such stupidity can exist in high naval or official circles. The remark is idiotic. When and if that bomb goes off, we don't want to be anywhere within the vicinity—anywhere, that is!

The whole business of the atomic bomb can be neatly summarized in a story that is making the rounds of the columnists. It punches powerfully, any and all illusions of the future.

Somebody asked Einstein, the story goes, what weapons he thought would be used in the Third World War. "I don't know what weapons will be used," he's supposed to have replied, "but I can tell you what weapons will be used in the Fourth World War." His interrogator looked puzzled, "What weapons in the Fourth World War?" "Stones," Einstein replied!

IMPOSSIBLE PROBLEM?

★

By L. A. Burt

★

OF ALL the things scientists have set their hands to, hardly in any have they failed to conquer. All the mighty products of our time and age have appeared for the most part because of curiosity.

There is one field though, through which the probing mind hasn't broken—and that is the mystery of Time. This all-familiar, ever-present subject thing that is both within and without us, seems to elude the researcher. Philosophers have speculated but none has come up with a good definition of time, much less any idea of what it is.

And this is strange. Why to begin with, don't more minds tackle the mystery? And why hasn't there been more success in solving it? The first can be answered because the problem seems so discouraging. The second is another matter. Einstein and Eddington, "Whitehead and Russell, the truly gigantic thinkers of time, plus a host of others have beaten their brains out trying to delve into the meaning—and have come up with nothing. The best we can do, they say, is to regard time as a sort of signpost or arrow, pointing the way to the running-down of the Universe! What a sad description! Is time ever going to be conquered? Is the prize of traveling through the fluid passage of events ever to come? In a phrase, is the time machine ever going to be built?

For Each Man Kills



A chill seemed to shroud their embrace, and a gaunt specter loomed closer to them . . .

By William F. Temple

**When jealousy drove him into sending
his rival to certain death, he didn't know
that his enemy and his sweetheart were one!**

SHE WAS different from most women, but one thing she had in common with all women: she knew that to keep a man waiting increased his desire for the sight of her.

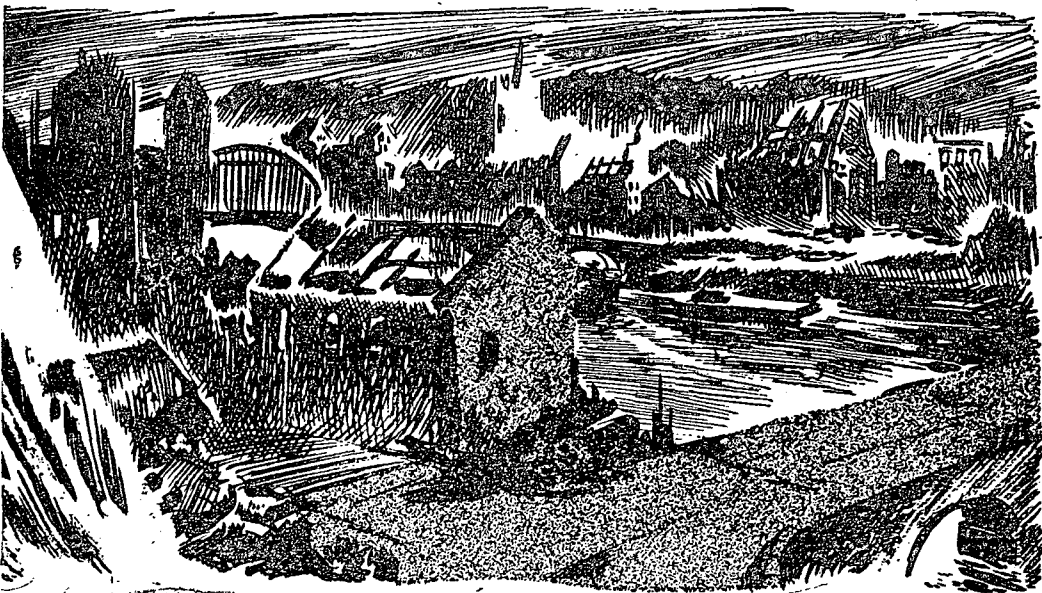
Ellen had called from the bedroom: "Make yourself at home, Russ. I've not finished dressing. The U.235 report is on the table... I'll be out in ten minutes."

The ten minutes became twenty, and Russ hadn't glanced at the report. He'd wandered moodily about the room looking at pictures of Ellen. The portrait in oils in the alcove. Sloman had got something of Ellen, something of the Gioconda smile,

but, as a whole of course it hadn't come off. Da Vinci himself couldn't have put all of Ellen on canvas. Not on one canvas. He'd have to fill a gallery with angles on her, and then, inevitably, there would still be something—an important something—that the mesh had been too coarse to hold.

Sloman was no Da Vinci, but he was good. The best of the bunch in Pine-town. He'd have to remember to suggest Sloman's name to the Mayor for presidency of the Academy. When they'd put the roof back on it...

There was a miniature of Ellen, also by Sloman. He didn't like it much. The classic features were too classic. The pale blue eyes were not



regarding you or anything in this world—what was left of it. It was that detached, silent mood, when Ellen gave her attention to other things than you and vouch-safed nothing about them. And you suspected they were of more importance than you. Which was disquietening if you loved her as Russell Howard did, with a fretting eagerness to possess.

There were three mirrors in the room. He inspected himself carefully in each. He was still young-looking but the lines of responsibility were beginning to show.

Three mirrors? The ration in Pinetown was one per apartment, and you had to be a 60-hour-a-week worker at that. He must sound Ellen about it. The glass-works was going well now, but the silvering bottle-neck...

The hell with it. He'd come here to forget work. He wasn't Atlas. Why did he keep trying to be?

There were fourteen photos of Ellen about the room. He counted them. They ranged from snaps to cabinets. The bulk of them pre-war. There were few chemicals to spare these days for purely personal photographs. 93 per cent of such chemicals were reserved for technical photography. About bromide: couldn't it be produced by...?

He shrugged the world from his shoulders again with an effort.

Come on, Ellen, he thought, come and take me out of myself. Talk about Beethoven's last quarters, and the peak novels of Mauriac, the omniscience of Balzac, the insight of Cezanne. And Siena and Amalfi and Bruges and Granada, and all those other wonderful faraway places you saw and whose beauty may now be dust for all anyone knows.

Why do I always have to come to

you? Why don't you come to the office sometimes, talk with me, and revive my faith in the vision I'm trying to build out of this ashcan—this Pinetown that never had beauty even before the rockets hit it?

His hand closed on the Palm Beach snap of Ellen and slipped it into his inner pocket. As he re-arranged the photos to cover the gap, he thought: that's one way I can carry you around with me. He liked that snap particularly. Ellen would never give him a photo of her. It was another odd side to her.

The bedroom door opened and she came out. He realized at once that no photo could ever remotely compensate for her physical absence. That strange and exciting contrast of light blue eyes and raven-black hair...

"What's the program?" she asked.

"Well," he said, hesitantly, "Jed's concert is postponed—he's ill. And the movie house is shut: run out of carbons. Anyway, we've seen all their films six times. Perhaps we could just sit here and talk?"

She looked around the room. "I'd like a change of scenery. I'm tired of looking at me. Let's walk."

"Not much change of scenery possible that way, either," he said. "Still—O. K."

THEY PICKED their way down the main street. The bigger holes had been filled in, but there were still enough small ones to twist your ankle unless you were careful. Russ frowned.

"I must get on to Hawkins. Seems to me his labor squads are spending more time in the park than on main street. These pot-holes—"

"You should be glad to see them," she said. "Only two years ago this street was twenty feet deep in debris, all the way. Hawkins' men moved

mountains. Look, Russ, let's forget it for awhile."

"Forget it!" he exclaimed. "I wish I could. But you can't escape it. Everywhere you look there's work screaming to be done. This town was half a century growing. It died in one night. We're trying to rebuild it on a shoe-string—with shoe-strings. No gasoline, no coal, little timber, only salvaged rubber—name any raw material you like and we either haven't got it or there's just enough to wear on your finger."

She knew it all, she'd heard it all. But she also knew he'd come to her to be praised and soothed. She squeezed his arm sympathetically. "There's no shortage of enthusiasm," she said. "The Mayor and you have seen to that."

"It was the Mayor," he said. "Without him we'd still be sitting on the rubble chewing our nails—and that's all we'd have to chew. He knew what to go for first: crops. He's organized everything since: labor squads, opening up the roads, patching up living quarters, rationing, the newspapers—we're even thinking about culture again. Before we're dead we may have a city that's a work of art."

They were nearing a lone Gothic arch. It was both the sole relic and the tombstone of the Protestant church. It could have been symbolic of anything, futility or the indestructibility of design, a monument to the betrayal of a religion or a sign still indicating the way. The low red sun threw a gaunt shadow of it across the new-laid turf of the park. And suddenly the relief of a decision came to him. This was the place, this was the time.

He steered Ellen to a seat of yellow brick. Her hand was still on his arm, and he regarded it as he spoke.

"Ellen, I want you to marry me. I don't know how you feel about it. We've chummed around, I guess, because we've certain interests in common. Because sometimes one gets tired of talking about the weather, and work, and how it was in the old days. But lately I've not been able to get you out of my mind. You're getting between me and everything. I've got to needing you somewhere near. Once, twice a week isn't enough. The waiting is hell. I want you to live with me. What do you say?"

It was cold. He had said this twenty times in his imagination with passion. When it came to it, it was like someone else speaking. A quiet, impersonal voice. His attention seemed more upon the attention of her hand than on her reply. It was a slim, delicate hand. The nails scrupulously clean, shining, with little flecks of white on them. They meant pleasant surprises, someone had told him long ago.

Then the hand was withdrawn from him, became a support for its owner's chin as she gazed abstractedly across the park at the flat desert.

"Russ, you'd better know," she said, slowly. "I've sopped up all I can find of atomic theory. Now I want to put it to use. I've applied to work on the pile. The application was granted."

He stared at her.

"You're taking a hellish risk. It's stuck together with stamp-paper. It leaks neutrons like a sieve leaks water. I'd much rather you kept away from it until we've learned more about it."

"The only way we can learn more about it is by practical experiment, trial and error. And hope we don't make one error too many. As you know, the literature we've managed

to scrape together about atomic physics could be tucked under one arm. If we're ever going to get this town looking like a town again, if we're going to have some degree of civilization, and if we ever hope to reach the world outside, we've got to have power. There's no other hope but the pile."

HHE GLOOMED, then answered reluctantly: "All right, Ellen. But be careful. I don't want you fading away... I'm still waiting for an answer."

"Oh, Russ, don't you understand? I've given you the answer. You remember what happened to Lilian Webb, who was the only woman who worked on the pile?"

Russell Howard went rigid. He paled slowly.

"Do you mean, that might happen to you?" He had difficulty in speaking. The hinges of his jaws were stiff.

"It's very likely. It could be termed an occupational disease."

He gripped her by the elbows, swung her round to face him. "Now, listen to me," he said, grimly and deliberately: "You're not—"

"Let me go," she said, very quietly. He could feel that her body had gone as tense as his. All friendliness had left her. She stared at him with eyes that had become wide and ice-blue. Slowly, he took his hands from her. He had known of this side of her character, but this was the first time it had been directed towards him.

"You're not the Mayor yet," she said. "Until you are, you have no authority to tell me what I shall or shan't do. Remember that."

He, who daily ordered the lives of half the town, felt like a reprimanded schoolboy. Instinctively, he covered it with anger.

"You'd better remember yourself you've a duty to the community. We've far too few women, and far too many of those have been barren by radiation. We have a generation to rear. If you think because of your intellectual arrogance you're exempt—"

She got up and walked away. He sat gripping the edge of the seat and gazing after her. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and gave the seat a mighty kick. It had only been constructed that day. One yellow brick fell out.

He swore, and stuck it crookedly back. Then he went dawdling along behind Ellen, feeling ferocious. She was stepping circumspectly over the rough ground.

At the corner where the drug-store had been, Lefty Smith stepped out of a broken doorway. He didn't look around, and thought Ellen was unescorted. He fell in behind her.

"Hello, sister, how 'bout you an' me—"

Russell pulled him round by the ear.

"Smith, you're incorrigible," he said. "You're for the cooler to-morrow. Meanwhile, here's something to go on with."

His uppercut was misjudged, and caught Smith in the Adam's apple.

"Sorry," said Russell, and split Smith's lip with a straight left. Smith decided to lie down and think it over. He'd served his purpose as an outlet for Russ's feelings, anyway.

Ellen had watched this brief slaughter. Russ saw the passing glint of excitement in her eyes. Yes, she was different from all women and yet like all women. She got a kick out of seeing men fighting for her.

"I'd better see you back to your apartment," Russ grunted.

"As you wish," she said, distantly. "But don't unbutton your armor, Sir Lancelot—you're not staying."

At the bottom of the stairs, she said: "There's no need to come up."

"I didn't pick up that uranium report, and the Mayor wants it to-night."

"Oh, well—come on, then."

As soon as he entered, he began: "Ellen—"

"There's the report," she said, thrusting it into his hand.

"Look," he said, "let me get this straight, and I'll go. You love science more than you love me. Is that it?"

"You could put it that way."

"Right," he said. "That ends it."

He turned to go. "Wait," she said. "If you don't mind, I'd like back that snapshot. The one that stood there." She indicated the place.

"Do you make an inventory every time I come and go?" he asked, sarcastically.

She held out her hand.

"I'd like to keep it to remember you by," he said, taking it from his pocket and looking at it.

"I don't want you to remember me." And then she said an odd thing: "I don't want to remember myself."

He passed it to her silently, and left. For the rest of his life he remembered the sight of her standing, watching him go. The tall, very feminine figure. The dark sweep of hair. The photo in one slim white hand. The unusual pale blue eyes watching him with the detachedness of royalty.

It was the last he saw of Ellen Carr.

CHAPTER II

HE TRUDGED along the pitted road towards the Mayor's house.

The last twenty minutes had been unreal. They hadn't registered. Things had happened, things had been said. But they had all been too quick. Time was only now slowly giving them form and significance. He had been a worried man, seeking to park his cares for the evening, even daring to hope for Ellen's permanent companionship. And suddenly he had butted into a wall and lost that companionship forever.

He was bewildered, angry, unhappy. There was a queer ache about his heart.

The Mayor was inking in a pile of tracings for blueprints, in the fading daylight. The candles were laid beside the candlesticks, ready for the continuance of work after dark. He allowed himself four a night, burnt in pairs. He never stopped work until the last candle had sputtered and died.

Mayor Pat Walkley was 69. He'd come to Pinetown an illiterate bricklayer of 18. He'd educated himself, lifted himself by his own bootstraps, and become the biggest contractor and wealthiest man in town. When he became Mayor he retired from business. In the short year before the war struck he did more for Pinetown than any other man in its history.

For one thing, he'd got Pinetown on atomic power ahead of many more important towns. And the secret wish of his heart had been granted: there had been an article about him in *Reader's Digest*.

Russ walked in.

"Here's the U.235 report from Miss Carr," he said in a low voice, stuck it in a corner of the table, and slumped in a chair.

"Miss Carr?" echoed the older man. He scratched his head with the end of the mapping pen, and looked

at Russ from under his white eyebrows. But Russ didn't say anything. Walkley picked up the report.

"H'm," he said, presently. "The pile's getting mighty low. I don't know how long I'm going to last myself, but it looks like I'll see the last of our U.235 out. Something's got to be done, son."

"Isn't there plutonium—or something?" said Russell, indifferently.

Walkley said, "There's probably something. The hell of it is that I wouldn't know the something if I saw it. Neither would you. Why did the bomb have to take the whole technical staff of the pile in one swipe? If it had spared but the youngest apprentice, he'd have known more than the rest of us. We're kids playing with fire, but we've got to have that fire. We've got to establish contact with any other oases there may be."

"This may be the sole Ararat," muttered Russ.

"Remember the airplane of the 17th May."

RUSS remembered. Two citizens had reported seeing a plane, flying some twenty miles off, low along the western horizon. It had passed and gone. It was never seen again. But the whole town had become wildly excited and kept a smoke-fire burning in the market square for a week.

Russ had been as excited and hopeful as the rest. But now he was wearing dark glasses.

"It was probably a bird or an optical illusion," he said. "The radio doesn't even give us an illusion."

There were twenty-three radio receiving sets left intact in the town. Since the raid nothing had been heard on them but static.

The Mayor said, "Broadcasting stations are primary objectives in war.

Maybe there's not one working anywhere on the continent. But you can't wipe out human beings as easily as that. There must be millions still around. Maybe it's not really too bad out there. You can't judge everything by Pinetown."

"If they can flatten an unimportant, unproductive place like this, in the middle of a desert..." began Russ loudly, but the Mayor shushed him.

"Let it rest. What's got into you to-night, Russ? You're the guy who's going to step into my shoes, and I've always thought you the right guy. But these shoes aren't for anyone who can only beef and think negatively. If you don't have faith that all's going to turn out for the best in the end, you won't get far. It's all in the point of view—"

"All right, I read your article in the *Digest*," Russ growled.

The Mayor colored a little. He started screwing two of the candles in the sticks.

"You're sore at me over something. What is it?" he asked quietly.

"You gave Ellen Carr permission to work on the pile, didn't you?"

"I did." Still quietly.

"Knowing that the thing's short on graphite and radiates like a log fire."

"It's not all that bad. Anyway, Ellen knows the extent of the danger. She knows more about it than either of us."

"You remember what happened to Lilian Webb?" pursued Russ. "It may happen to Ellen. She told me."

"She told me, too," murmured Walkley, and began playing with the two unlit candles. "Even in the old days, it seems, no one knew much about the effect of neutron radiation on people. They knew continued X-radiation produced sterility in males,

and that neutron radiation is four times more powerful in that direction. And they knew that in females neutron radiation is liable to start tumors on the internal organs, particularly the kidneys. That's what happened to Webb."

"And then?"

"A benign tumor on the kidney pressed upon the cortex of one of the suprarenal bodies. That made it empty into the bloodstream a good deal more than the natural supply of sex hormone. Result: virilism. She developed masculine characteristics. Became, in fact, a man. There were many such cases known to medical history."

"Couldn't Doc Willis have cut away the tumor?"

"Willis is just a G. P. Our only surviving medical man of any sort. He's not a surgeon. He could diagnose, but he couldn't operate. In any case, Webb wanted to keep on work at the pile. The tumor would have grown again. If the change should happen to Ellen, it'll be permanent. She knows that. She went into it with her eyes open. You can't blame me."

"I can blame you for taking her from me. To-night I asked her to be my wife."

ONE OF the candles dropped from the Mayor's hand, rolled over a tracing and smudged the still wet ink.

"Russ. I had no idea. I thought—you were just friends. If I'd have known—"

He came around the table and put a hand on Russell's shoulder.

"I'll cancel the permission," he said.

"It wouldn't give me Ellen back," said Russell. "The split's come now. She turned me down deliberately. She admitted her love for science

was greater than her love for me."

"She means her love of the good science can do, not science itself. Look, Russ, to keep the town healthy and well fed we've got to recover some of the old knowledge. We need all the science we can get. We only produce just enough food. If there's a threat of blight to the crops, we want to know what to do. The population is bound to increase—"

"Not if all the women behave like Ellen Carr," said Russ.

"We've got to make arable land of that desert—somehow. Some application of atomic power may do it. There's medicine. We've one overworked doctor and no therapy center. Ellen dug some book out of the library ruins. It's badly burnt, like the rest. But there was some important dope on extracting radioactive isotopes from U.235. They've invaluable medical uses, for one thing. If Ellen has to sacrifice her sex, it'll be in the cause of us all, not for any private reason."

"I don't give a hoot about her reasons," said Russell, bitterly. "She didn't see fit to discuss them with me. She chose her path. She can take it. If I were made Mayor right now I'd still let her go, and be damned to her."

"You'll get over this bitterness, Russ. To-morrow morning—"

But Mayor Walkley was not to know to-morrow morning. Russ leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, and the bullet that was meant for the back of his head fanned his hair and drilled into the Mayor's heart.

At the report, Russ leaped up, seized his chair by its arms and flung it behind him. One leg grazed Lefty Smith's cheek. The other knocked the smoking revolver from his hand.

Lefty dived after the gun. Russ dived after Lefty, grabbing one of the candlesticks as he passed.

Lefty got the gun. At the same time he got a crack on the skull from the base of the candlestick. The base was heavily weighted with lead. Lefty had a thin skull. He'd missed his revenge, and now he'd missed all chance of it. There was no tomorrow for him, either.

With a little groan, Russ knelt over Walkley. Even in the flickering light of the remaining candle, it was plain enough.

The Mayor was dead. Long live the Mayor!

CHAPTER

THE NEW Mayor's inheritance was the broken bones of a city, several hundred square miles of desert, unending work and absolute authority. Pinetown was under a benevolent dictatorship, but it was a dictatorship.

"Democracy can return later, when there's time for subcommittees to argue," Walkley had said. "First things first. Order and discipline, single-minded direction—until we're on our feet. That means rule by a strong man who knows what to do and the quickest way to do it. And that means me, and probably my successor. We'll see."

Russell Howard continued the autocracy. He hoped it wouldn't be too long before he could spread the burden. But Walkley had left plenty of pressing problems unsolved.

Of the sheaves of atomic missiles launched at the Pinetown area, only a few single rockets had hit the center of the target. Whether intentionally or not, the bulk had saturated a great outer circle around the city, well out in the desert. The

terrain of porous rock out there had retained the radio-activity unusually long. It was still an impassable barrier, and from the Geiger-Muller counts would remain so for a long time yet.

No exploring party had found a break in it. No storming out expedition had survived the crossing of it. There were no planes, no automobiles. The monorail that used to bear the 20th Century through Pinetown dropped into a great bomb crater like a frozen thread of water.

The isolation had to be broken. It must be faced: Pinetown was not self-sufficient. The water supply was limited. Therefore, so was irrigation and the crops. Scarcely any raw materials, no fuel. They were living on their small and dwindling capital. They must link up with outside.

Walkley and he had been working on an airplane, to be driven electrically by a battery charged from the pile. It was a bizzare contraption, a patchwork from half a dozen wrecked fighters. They knew little of aerodynamics. It was probably a death trap. But it had to be finished.

There were many things that had to be finished...

The new Mayor worked eighteen hours a day and often more. They said his energy was miraculous, greater than Walkley's at his peak. They didn't know he was cramming his mind with a thousand things to squeeze out the one thing that sought to dominate it: the memory of Ellen Carr.

There was no Ellen Carr now. But there was an Alan Carr, a young man who worked at the pile. This Russell knew from reports. He'd never been near the pile again, nor Ellen's old apartment. Sometimes he wondered whether his drive to

break out of the city was anything else than a desperate flight from all that.

He'd organized an H.Q. on quite a scale. There was a drawing office. There were desks, typewriters files, even a dictaphone they'd got going. No candles, but electric light burning all night—run on a line from the pile.

There were executives, designers, clerks, typists.

Especially one typist.

Her name was Maureen. She was eighteen, and she came from what had been uptown. She was petite, dainty, uncomplicated. No Mona Lisa smile about her, but a cheerful grin. She was of Celtic stock. She had black hair and light blue eyes, and when you saw her face at a certain angle—you felt a little stab, if Ellen Carr had meant anything to you.

Was that stab pain or pleasure? Russ didn't know. But he found it grew necessary, and unless Maureen was around it became hard to concentrate. When she was there, a void was filled.

He found he was sleeping better. And others found his temper better.

MAUREEN became his private secretary. The next development was old, old. She affected sophistication in her speech sometimes, she was quite uncalculating. He wondered whether she ever thought of him beyond his work. But these days he scarcely existed beyond his work. He must show her he had other interests. That he was human.

He took her to one of Jed's little shows. And then a dance.

On the way home: "Maureen," he said. "Are you the marrying sort?"

"Oh, I think so. It runs in the

family. My mother got married."

"Would you consider marrying me?"

She colored faintly, and looked away.

"Yes, I'd—I'd consider it."

She didn't resist his kiss.

Soon at the office they were exchanging little affectionate messages with their eyes—privately, intimately, despite the press of company and business. They became engaged.

Then one day Maureen didn't turn up at the office. She sent a message to say she wasn't well. Russ stuck it til midday, then sacrificed his lunch to go and see her.

She lay on the couch. The vivacity had left her. She was very pale. Even her eyes seemed more pale. Pale blue eyes. Russ inhibited a memory.

"Hello, Russ... Guess I've been overeating."

"Overworking, more exactly. I've been a fool, crowding you along. I should have remembered women have difficulties men never think of. Next time, girlie, don't be afraid to tell me. I'm six hundred kinds of a fool, but don't let me hurt you again."

"It isn't that, Russ. It's—I don't know what. I haven't the energy of a louse in its dotage. Doc Willis doesn't know what it is, either."

Doc Willis didn't, then. But at the end of a week, when he saw his patient develop purpuric rash, enlargement of the lymphatic glands, and a high temperature accompanied by a growing anaemia, he knew all right.

He came thrusting into the office in the middle of a conference on the relaying of the sewage system. He wanted to see Russ immediately.

Russ told him: "If we don't get this business settled to-day, you'll

have more cases of bubonic plague on your hands than you'll know what to do with."

Willis said: "If anyone gets bubonic, you have to shoot 'em—that's all I know what to do. I'm here about something we can deal with right away—and it's got to be dealt with right away."

"What's that?"

"The case of Maureen Knight."

Russell went taut. "I'll be right with you—This meeting is adjourned for an hour. That enough, Doc?"

"Should be."

The office cleared, save for the Mayor and the doctor.

"What's wrong with Maureen, Doc?"

"Leukemia."

"Is that bad?"

Doc Willis chewed his thumb-nail and gazed at the floor.

"Medical science has always regarded it as fatal. Arsenic or benzole can stave it off for a bit. Not for long. Maureen's is a chronic case threatening to turn acute."

Russell's face was like stone. "I thought you said we can deal with it."

"It's this way," said Willis. "Leukemia is a hyperphasia of the tissues producing white cells in the blood. An excess of white cells is anaemia. Her blood's getting clogged with 'em. You can break 'em down with X-rays—if you can get them without at the same time burning up the healthy tissues. But that's near enough impossible with exterior radiation, or even with radium needles. However, just before the war they were developing a technique for getting around that, using radio-active tracers."

"What are they?"

"I think," said the doctor, getting to his feet, "you'd better hear about

them from the person who knows most about them—Alan Carr. He's waiting outside."

There was a pause.

"Bring him in," said Russell Howard.

IT MIGHT have been Ellen's brother. He was tall, slim, pale. The black hair was cropped short. The lips were pale now, and around them was the slight shadow of shaven hair.

There were little, curling black hairs on the backs of his hands... The hands were thin, muscular, stained from work—there was no memory of Ellen there. But Ellen looked at him through the pale blue eyes, and the faint, enigmatic smile was Ellen, too—it touched him on a nerve, and he winced.

"Do you wish me to stay?" asked Doc Willis.

"Yes. Yes. Stay," said Russell, jerkily. He put his fingers to his eyelids, as though his eyes ached, and passed the tips down his cheeks. He affected weariness, indifference. "Perhaps your colleague will explain his technique for dealing with leukemia." He spoke as though Alan Carr was a stranger. Perhaps he was.

In a quiet, unemasculated voice, Carr said: "Theoretically, it's simple. In practice, less so. The marrow of the bones is the chief birthplace of white blood cells. We have to get radio-activity into that marrow to break down the excess of those cells. Radium would be fatal. Its effect lasts too long. 1690 years too long, to be exact. But, by exposing them to neutron streams from the pile, we can make common chemicals radio-active. Including substances absorbed into the body by metabolism."

"Such as?"

"Iodine, carbon, phosphorous...

These treated substances act chemically in the same way as their inert isotopes. Now, bones have a large phosphorous content. A large proportion of phosphorous taken in food will be deposited in the bones. If some of that phosphorous is radio-active..."

"I get it," said Russell. "But prolonged radio-activity in the body is fatal you say. How, then—"

"The half-life of radio-phosphorous is only fourteen days. Just long enough to produce good effects and avoid harmful ones. Treatment can be continued according to the patient's condition."

"Then a permanent cure is possible?" said Russell.

"Possible, yes, but certain, no," said Carr. "We don't know enough about it to be certain. Even before the war they didn't know enough about it. And I've only a few tattered scraps of information to go on. Those, and my judgment."

Russell was thoughtful and silent.

"It's the only chance," Doc Willis prompted. "If it's not certain, the alternative is—I can assure you of that."

Russell took out his handkerchief to wipe his lips.

"Begin treatment at once," he said muffledly.

CHAPTER IV

ALAN CARR had attended Maureen Knight for two months, supervised four meals containing radio-active phosphorous and traced it with a G.-M. counter, and made copious notes. He had also made her very thorough acquaintance. There was not a great deal to know about her. She was not complex.

On the other hand, he remained enigmatical to her, and because of that, fascinating. She realized she

only knew a corner of him, and there were great tracts of his knowledge, experience and apprehension that were hidden from her. Constantly she tried to discover more of him. They had long talks...

She spent most of the day on a chaise-longue reading the books he had lent her, listening to the Chopin he played for her, reflecting on some life-revealing thing he had said. He was far more handsome than Russ, more courteous, more understanding. And more self-controlled.

Perhaps, she thought, he was more understanding because he had once been a woman. It was the strangest thing, trying to picture him as Ellen Carr. She always failed. Maybe because she had never known Ellen Carr. Alan was completely masculine. Very attractively so.

Russell called as often as he could slip the responsibilities of the Mayoralty. It wasn't often. And he was usually worried and tended to unload his worries on her. It was rather thoughtless, she thought. He seemed to expect from her a strength she'd never had since this languishing anaemia set in. Though she was feeling noticeably better now.

She began to notice that she looked forward to the visits of Alan, while those of Russ took all her patience.

One day Russ arrived while Alan Carr was there. Maureen was talking with real animation to Alan. It was an animation Russ rarely saw nowadays. His face lighted up. It was Maureen of the office days, the grin, the cracks she tried to make sound sophisticated.

Alan Carr stood up. All except the halt had to stand in the presence of the Mayor.

"Sit down, Alan," said Russ. It was the first time he'd used the name. It was the first time he'd felt any kindly disposition towards him.

Carr had restored Maureen. That must never be forgotten.

"I was just going," said Alan Carr.

"I'll see you to the door," said Russ.

Carr shrugged slightly. He gave Maureen a parting smile. She started to smile back, and then her face went serious, as though she had suddenly thought of something. Russ saw it, and was vaguely disturbed.

But, out of earshot of Maureen, he said: "Well, Alan Carr, it's odd how things turn out. I lost the one I loved to science. If I hadn't, I should have lost the one I love now. Maybe I can appreciate your point now. I mean, to love science is to love what it can do for people. In a way, that's loving people generally, instead of restricting it to one person. That's it, huh?"

THAT FAINT puzzling smile was evident again. This time it didn't wound. Rather, it irritated. Russ didn't like to be smiled at when he was trying to be sincere. But he never had been certain of the source of that smile. It was something deep and probably not akin to anything in Russ's own nature.

"I don't think you appreciate my point at all," said Alan Carr. "I doubt if you'll ever be able to. Good day."

Russell went back, his perturbation growing. He didn't like uncertainty. His instinctive reaction to it was to take positive action. He went straight to the point.

"Maureen, by all reports you're on the upgrade—thanks to Carr. I don't want to rush you, but I'd like us to get married as soon as possible. D'you think you'd be well enough by, say, next week?"

"Russ," she said, not looking at him, fingering a worn place in the tapestry of the couch, "I was going

to ask you to release me from our engagement."

Maureen bit her lip.

"What?" It was as if he'd been hit by something solid.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You've been so good to me. I like you an awful lot, really. I thought I loved you. I *did* love you. It's only that I've found I love someone more."

"Who?"

"Alan."

He sat down, and didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or break up the furniture. He began a silly little tittering. It was all so damned crazy.

The person he had once hoped to marry looked like the person marrying the person he now hoped to marry. Say that again, and try to make it sound sense. It was like one of those riddles about who is who's father. His late love had come to steal his present love. The two girls he wanted to marry end up by marrying each other! Any way you looked at it, it was still the maddest thing since Jonah and the whale.

"And what does Alan think about it?" he asked, presently.

"He loves me. He told me so."

"I see," he said. "I see." Quite calmly, he went on: "Well, Maureen, I can't hope to change your feelings by argument, so I won't try. You know I love you and always shall. Let's leave it at that."

But a little devil of white-hot anger had been born inside him. A devil who was growing, taking possession of him, and who had no intention of leaving it at that.

Russell Howard went home. He locked himself in his apartment with several quarts of rye and bourbon.

The jag lasted a week. He saw no one, would answer no one, and ate nothing but a few crackers.

When he came out of it, he

wasn't Russell Howard any more. He was Nature's chosen agent to avenge an abominable outrage that had been done to her. That was the way he saw it. Or perhaps that was the way the devil who possessed his sickened and humiliated soul made him see it. He was Mother Nature's special representative charged with a holy mission.

He turned up at the office with bloodshot eyes and a splitting head. He had a week's growth of beard. That would have to wait. His hands were too shaky to deal with it now, and he didn't want a barber or anyone else to lay a finger on his riven skull.

The acting secretary, a fat blonde woman, was quivering with the burden of urgency.

"Oh, Mr. Howard, I've been trying to get you for the last three days. There's a report in from the atomic pile—"

"Send someone for some sandwiches," he said tersely. "I'm hungry."

"Yes, but—"

"Go on!" he roared.

She jellied away, but was brave enough to return before the sandwiches.

"Mr. Howard, this is important. The fuel at the pile is running unexpectedly low. It may last another two weeks, not more."

He stared at her.

"Someone's responsible for miscalculation, then," he said. "I understood there was enough for several months yet... Give me that report."

AS HE REACHED to take it, the whole plan leapt into his mind, complete and detailed. It was as though it had already been prepared by someone and held in reserve until this destined moment.

Oh, yes, he was only an agent, doing the bidding of a power greater than himself. He could not have thought this up himself.

"Send for Rollins," he said, quietly. "And when he's on his way, send for Alan Carr and have him wait in the outer office."

He'd digested the report on the U.235 situation when Rollins arrived.

"Sit down, Rollins. How's the anti-radiation equipment going?"

Rollins had for some time been working on Project Breakout No. 10, the organization for the next attempt to cross the wide radio-active belt. The main new points of this Project were special suits and masks to be worn by the party and insulated tents to sleep in during the traverse.

Rollins said: "Fraid there's nothing fresh to be added to my last report. Can't get the material to guarantee more than 53% protection. If it weren't for these darned shortages—particularly graphite—"

"Never mind. That's good enough. Get four suits and a tent to hold four ready by Tuesday next."

"But they'll be death-traps," said Rollins, surprised. "They won't stop anyone being burned to the guts before they're halfway across the belt."

"No one's crossing the belt," said Russell. "It's just a little foraging party."

"Even so, I wouldn't hold a brief for their lives for more than a couple of days."

Russell rang for the secretary.

"Show Mr. Rollins out and Mr. Carr in."

He didn't have to remind Rollins he was under orders. Rollins knew there could be no further argument. He left, depressed.

Alan Carr came in.

RUSSELL didn't tell him to sit down. He made him stand.

"I hear the U.235 is running out. Why wasn't I-informed earlier of this?" Russell snapped it out like a whip.

"Because you were drunk and incapable," said Carr, calmly.

"Somebody at the pile must have been the same way—or just plain incapable," said Russell. "The last figures show a reserve of at least five months."

Carr shrugged. "Not my department. I'm not running the pile. I'm only engaged in research."

"Well, well. That's a fine exhibition of the spirit of science, I must say. Nothing to do with you, eh? I thought you were so keen on science you'd sacrifice anything—or anybody—for it?"

He could not help the emphasis on "anybody." That wound still had not healed.

"Your thoughts are not my affair, either, Mr. Howard."

Russ clenched his fist, then slowly unwound it. Crude violence now would spoil the greater plan. He looked narrowly at the slim, cool figure. It was Ellen's eyes that stared him out. He looked down at the report again.

"We'll soon see how far this devotion to science goes," he muttered. And suddenly he shot out: "Do you love Maureen Knight?"

There was a silence.

"I am bound to answer questions dealing with my work," said Carr, in a low voice, "but my personal affairs remain my personal affairs."

Russell depressed the corners of his lips.

"And I thanked you for saving her for me! You saved her for yourself."

"She's not saved for anybody," said Carr. "For a long time yet

she'll need a diet of radio-active phosphorous to keep her alive. And the pile will run out in a couple of weeks."

"Can't you build up a store?" The question was perfunctory. He knew the answer well enough.

"If I baked ten tons of phosphorous, it would all lose radio-activity within fourteen days."

"So we've both lost Maureen, it seems. You don't appear to be very upset."

"Don't I?" said Alan Carr, and Russell was reminded that there were still a lot of angles about that personality he hadn't even guessed about. There was some pattern of deep emotions behind that controlled exterior. What that pattern was he'd never know unless Carr unburdened himself. There was small likelihood of that.

"Be that as it may, I'm going to give you the chance to save her," said Russell.

Carr went very still. "How?"

"I've been investigating a report that there's an unexploded atomic rocket lying out there in the radio-active belt. It's the real thing, all right. Here's a photo taken through a telescopic lens... You'll be able to see it through a telescope from Point 679 on a bearing of 23 degrees."

"You're sending me?"

"I'm putting the facts before you. We want that U.235 out of the bomb. It'll be a ticklish business getting it out. You know more about it than anyone. You're the safest bet. We've got to have the stuff. If we don't, my airplane will never get off the ground and the chances of reaching the outside slip near to zero. And if you care for Maureen, here's your chance to keep her alive. I'll send three huskies with you from the labor squads to do

the heavy work. Rollins will have protective suits and a tent ready for all of you by Tuesday."

They held each other in a steady gaze for a long moment.

Russ thought: He knows I'm sending him to his death. He knows that if he gets back at all, he'll be burned to a cinder.

But Carr said nothing.

Russ said: "It's all for the sake of science, you know. You're not choosy about making sacrifices for that? You used not to be."

Bitterness stained every word.

"I'll go," said Carr. "Is that all?"

Russ nodded. The bitterness had turned into a pain that gripped him so that he could not speak.

Alan Carr turned to leave. The ghost of the strange smile had come back. He said something under his breath. Russ caught a bit of it: "...kills the thing he loves."

"What was that?" jerked Russ.

"Oh, nothing..." The door closed behind Carr.

CHAPTER V

THEY'D BEEN gone thirty-four hours. They should be near the bomb now. Perhaps they'd already pitched camp at it.

Russ was beginning his second quart of whisky.

He had tried to see Maureen. She'd held him off. Sent a message by Doc Willis that she didn't feel well enough to receive visitors. Doc upheld her.

Of course, they both knew he'd sent Alan Carr to practically certain death through a mad jealousy. Everyone knew he was playing Othello.

There had been no need to risk killing off the best scientific brain in the town. A score of other atomic workers knew enough to have made a fair attempt at the job.

Russ reached for the glass. As his fingers touched it, there came a low distant rumbling. It was a purely conditioned reflex action as he plunged straight to the floor, under the table, leaving the whisky standing above his head. That sound was an echo from the long night when Pinetown died.

The rumbling swelled into a rolling roar. A blast of heated air smote Pinetown like the hammer of Thor. The building heaved, the window flew into a thousand fragments, the ceiling came down with a rush and a choking gray cloud of plaster dust sprang from the floor and filled the room.

All through Pinetown unsafe buildings rocked and fell, and a rack of burning sand and dust rolled like a tidal wave over the town. All at once it was twilight, though the red smeary sun hung up there at zenith. A glow was spreading in the building across the street: a fire had started.

Then the wind passed, carrying much brick dust mixed with the dust of the desert. The glow across the road shrank but still continued to burn. The faint crackle of its progress, a slithering here and there of loose debris, and some distant calls for help were the only sounds in the town now.

Russ heard none of them. He lay under a splintered table listening to a dead voice in his mind.

"There's no new wisdom, Russ. It's all in the Upahishads: Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. To give. To sympathize. To keep control. There's no other way to live fully..."

Live fully! And he'd smashed that bright and aware life like someone slamming at a rat. Give!—

he'd given a death sentence. Sympathise! He'd had plenty of sympathy. For himself. Keep control! That was a laugh.

So he laughed. He laughed until he cried. He thought he'd been living in hell. Now he found what hell was really like.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS WELL past the middle of the night when Doc Willis came banging at the split door. There was no need to bang so loudly. Russell was awake. For three weeks now he'd scarcely known what sleep was. But he had learned the living death of insomnia.

Russell opened up.

"It's Maureen," said Doc. "Her chances of seeing the dawn are pretty small. I think she knows it. She wants to see you."

"I've tried a dozen times to see her," said Russell. "Why this last minute change of heart?"

But he felt no curiosity. Nor sadness nor anger nor, any longer, shame. He could not even feel tired. He was like something frozen alive in ice.

Willis, who did feel tired, said wearily: "I don't know. She just wants to tell you something. And when it's over, remind me—I've something to give you."

They walked together through the silent night.

Doc Willis said once: "There's been no hope, of course, since the pile stopped. Pity that gamble to get uranium didn't come off."

Russell said nothing.

When they got there, all there was to see of Maureen was a pale yellow face, with the teeth protruding through the shrivelled lips, the cheekbones jutting—it was the face of a little old Chinese lady. The

eyes had yellowed, too. The hair was soot-black, lustreless. The rest of her was beneath the bed-clothes, and it was as well. There had never been much of her at any time.

"Hello, Maureen," he whispered.

The jaundiced eyes moved slowly to his face. A small, gasping voice answered: "Hello... Russell. I haven't... much time."

"I guess none of us has," said Russell. "I've been trying to see you—"

"I know... I was foolish... It doesn't matter now... Nothing matters very much... when you're where I am. I loved... Alan so... and you killed him."

"Yes," said Russell. "I loved you. I was insanely jealous, and I killed him. I knew there was a strong chance of the bomb going off when they tried to operate on it. If it hadn't been that, it would have been the radiation. He had no chance, and he knew it. It's no good my saying I'm sorry. I'm beyond feeling sorry. I'm beyond feeling anything. There's no difference between you and me except that I'm standing up."

"I can still feel... sorry. For you."

It was as if the ice had started to melt, and he stirred with pain.

"Don't, don't," he said, abruptly. "It—hurts."

"I wanted to... tell you... about Alan. He... came to see me... before he left... He said he didn't want... to hurt me... but he didn't love me... He'd made... a mistake... He said... he'd make every effort... to get back... with the uranium. For my sake. And... for your sake. He said... you loved me... very much. And... I was to forget him... and make you happy... when I got well."

Doc Willis watched the face of the man at the bedside, and then he got up and went to gaze out of the

patched window at the night. He'd been at too many distressing death scenes not to get hardened. But he knew Russell too well to be able to watch his agony with any detachment.

At the window he watched the pale stain of dawn spread slowly up the sky. He had not listened to the quietly murmuring voices behind him because it was none of his business.

And now one of the voices grew very faint and passed and was heard no more.

RUSSELL wandered through the streets in the early light. He had started to go home, but that purpose had faded and was forgotten. He was slouching along quite aimlessly.

All at once he found himself looking down at the yellow brick seat in the park, where he had proposed to Ellen, where he had been rejected. He sat down slowly.

He became aware of the crumpled envelope in his hand. Doc Willis had had to remind himself to give it to him.

Russell plowed it open with a forefinger. He tried to focus his attention on the sheets it contained.

A letter in Ellen's handwriting. No—Alan's writing. Same thing.

Dear Russ.

I left this with Doc, and you'll only see it if Maureen doesn't survive. I shan't survive myself, of course, but—and this will surprise you—I don't want to.

But I do want Maureen to live. She can give you the happiness I was never able to. So I hope you never see this.

But should you lose her, I would like you to understand that I didn't deliberately try to take her from you. All this trouble has arisen be-

cause I am the sort of character I am. I can't help it. I tried to change it with my sex, but it was born in me and it stayed in me.

Ellen Carr was much too fond of Ellen Carr. Surely you must have gathered that from the number of pictures of her in her own apartment. And the number of mirrors.

We go through a period of narcissism in childhood, when we become exceptionally self-conscious, when we spend half our time admiring ourselves in mirrors. I stuck there, that's all. I never grew out of that phase.

But I hated it, and hated myself. Myself? How many selves are we?... Who was the self that loved myself, and who was the self that despised myself because of that? And who was the self that loved you?—because I did.

But I knew it was no use marrying you, because I'd always love myself more than I loved you. You deserved better than that. I deliberately took the post at the pile, not because of any special love for science, but to give you a chance to escape from me—and me a chance to escape from myself.

As far as I was concerned, it didn't work out. Alan Carr remained in love with Ellen Carr. His physical form had changed. His memory hadn't. He used to moon over her pictures and long for her, until he destroyed them. He thought he'd escaped at last. And then he met Maureen Knight.

He saw in her just what you had seen in her. He and you were both in love with a memory. Maureen had physical features and little personal characteristics which partly personified that memory. She was very reminiscent of Ellen, you know. We both made our longings

material in her.

Maureen, unfortunately, sensed Alan Carr's longing and returned it. She let him know, and he was foolish enough to admit to her he loved her. The moment he told her that he realised it was a lie. He loved only the ghost of Ellen Carr he saw in her.

His self-disgust became more than he could bear. And against his will he was hurting Russell Howard all over again.

There seemed no course left but to make an end of himself and his harmful self-love. And then you handed him the opportunity and the means. He accepted it gladly. Especially as through it he might save Maureen's life. Before he went he told her his declaration had been a mistake, and that you were the man for her.

I only hope it turns out all right for you both. If it doesn't, and you read this, then perhaps it may persuade you not to think too harshly of

Yours,

Alan, who was also Ellen.

PS. If you remember your Greek mythology, Tiresias, the blind soothsayer of Thebes, also lived as both man and woman. He thought there

was more pleasure in being a woman. But he was a relatively simple soul compared with me. I was not happy as either. There wasn't much point in going on.

HE READ it slowly through again, and as he did so an airplane came buzzing from the distance and circled the town. He did not raise his eyes.

The plane came in for a landing on the flat stretch beyond the park.

He did not look at it, did not look at the semi-clothed inhabitants of the town who ran shouting from their beds to greet it. Pinetown was making contact with the outer world on Pinetown's own ground.

A hardly audible voice was repeating over and over again in his memory: "Each man kills the thing he loves."

Thousands of tongues had said that since Wilde. But no one had ever voiced its concomitant: that when he does, each man kills himself also.

There was a clamor of rejoicing about the airplane. The outer world was friendly, was going to break the radio-active ring. Life was beginning for Pinetown.

It had ended for its Mayor.

SPACE-JALOPPIES



By William Karney



UNTIL THE accident involving the Centaurus No. 1, nobody at all paid any attention to a problem which will have to be solved—junkyards! The one in Urane Center on Luna is the worst offender because a rugged mining community doesn't care about who comes and goes through its airlocks as long as they pay the fee. But there are a couple of spots here on Terra that are bad too.

As its name implies, the Centaurus No. 1,

was the number one lifeboat of a space-liner long since gone. The Crane yard in Urane center had dozens of beaten up old wrecks laying around. Anyone could come in and buy them, though for the most part they had to be moved by crane and tractor.

Evidently, the C.N.1 had still a good motor left, for the two boys just walked into the yard, plunked down the seven hundred credits and floated it off. You can't recommend this practice because too many

kids are doing and have done it, but it does give you sort of a feeling of pride to think that kids like that have the nerve to buy up a junky space-boat, overhaul it, and take it into the system.

Wilson and Lessing were picked up in the Asteroid belt by the Patrol by pure chance. If they hadn't been, by now the kids would be dead. And they were only fifteen.

The story gotten out of them was simple. Both were nuts about spacemen and anything pertaining to space. Lessing, the studious one taught himself a fair amount of astrogation, and in all fairness to the boy it must be said that it was a faulty octant that caused the mix-up. Anyhow they left their homes in Luna City, managed to get into Urane Center, bought the boat with hard-earned money, fitted it out according to their best means and decided to try a Martian "jump".

The make-shift engines broke down, the astrogation was bad, and the boys drifted in their little craft into the "Belt". They drifted around for a month and a half—on quarter rations—before the Patrol picked them up. They had no communications. After giving them a good dressing down, the Patrol of course shipped them home, but the matter brought out the fact that there are many kids and some adults who have also gone into space in crummy jury-rigged junk. This is what the Patrol is fighting against. God only knows how many people have been lost by such fool-hardy action.

Agents are cracking down on all dealers in anything that can possibly get into space. You can be sure from now that this—the Twentieth Century word, "jalopy" fits exactly—jalopy-riding is going to stop!

MALIGNANT MENTOR



By Leslie Phelps



LIKE ALL of the offices of Telepathica, Inc., this one was little more than a simple, comfortably-furnished, room in the Administration Building. Through the large picture-window, the sunlight streamed in brilliantly. In a way, the room was beautiful. But I was not deceived—something was wrong.

For I suspected the odor of death in this room.

Three weeks ago Telepathica, Inc. had assigned me to the job of looking into a series of deaths its staff of operators had undergone. First a Martian agent, then two on Titania—all males, had died while "in reception." Telepathica, Inc. which transmits and receives telepathic waves, using booster amplifiers and human senders and receivers, was plenty worried. Somehow some unknown was managing to push lethal thoughts over the safety barriers. As special agent for the company, I went to work and after a little deduction, an examination of times, and a strong suspicion, this Tellus office seemed to be the origin.

The door opened and Lorane Senn, sender three-oh-four, entered the room. She walked calmly over to her desk with its multiplicity of dials and sat down. I observed her carefully. She was young and attractive, but there seemed to be a tightness around her mouth as if she were under tension.

And I knew full well, she was aware of my thought-screen. I would no more have entered the room without it, than I would have gone in nude.

"May I help you?" she asked, in a high strained voice.

"Yes," I said, "I'd like a message put

through and an immediate reply." I handed her the slip of paper. It contained a innocuous business comment; actually it was a coded signal to a screen-protected agent on Luna.

"If you'll wait outside," she said, "I'll send it through at once."

I'd hoped she wouldn't ask that, because I had to see her in action. Quickly I walked through the door, then through a side-corridor and with a master key into her private office. I opened the door quietly, just a hair. I could see her clearly. She bent over her board, her face screwed up in tight concentration. At first the look was the common abstracted look of one who is trying to telepath a message. Her eyes opened.

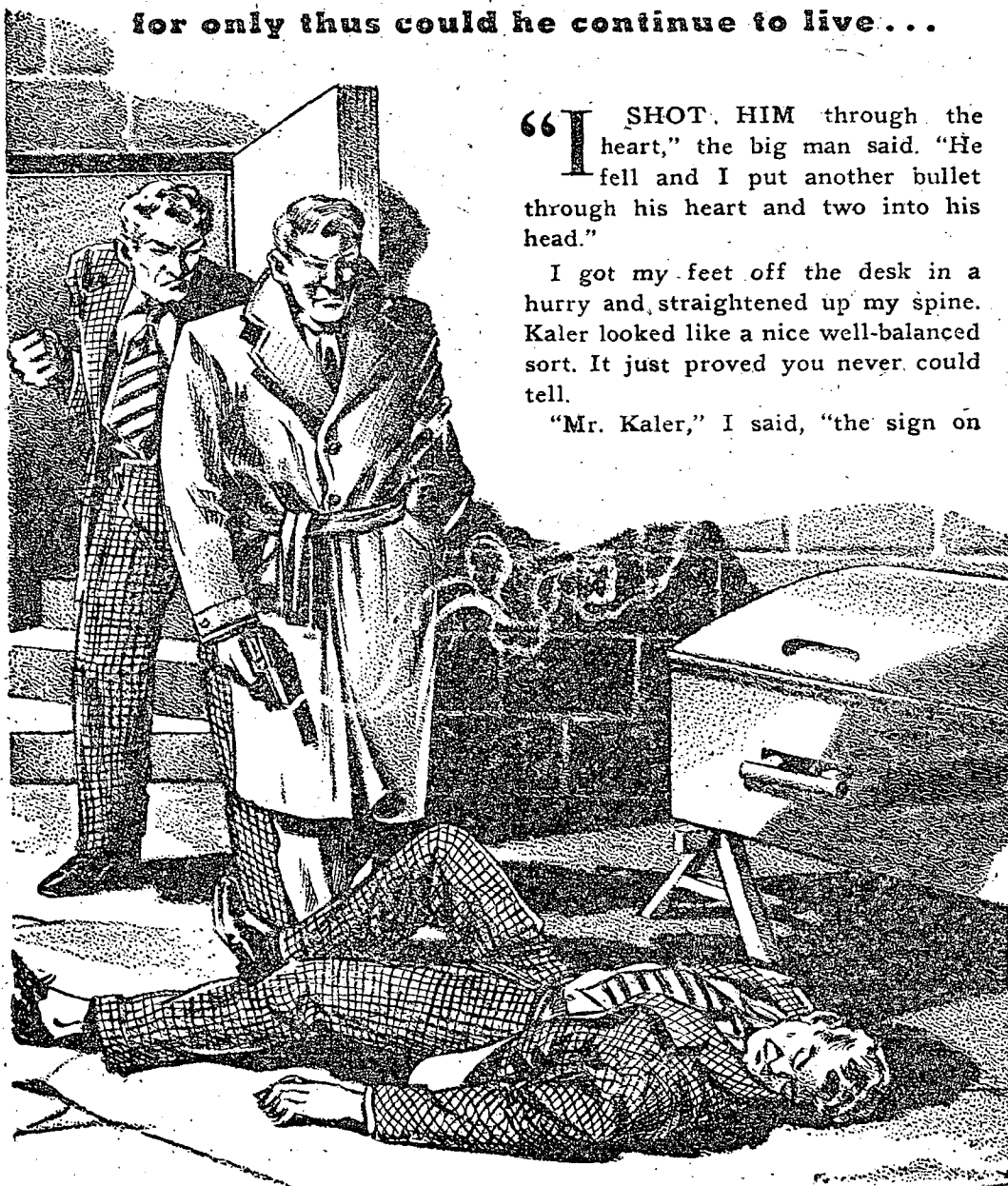
I'll never forget the look on her face that followed. It was compounded of hate and lust and anger and degeneracy. It was as if a beam of sheer concentrated hatred existed as a material thing in the room!

At that instant, in my concentration, I leaned against the door. It swung open and I stumbled into the room. The girl looked up, saw me, and her eyes went wide with fear and hatred. The jolt had disturbed my screen slightly and the barest edges of a thought filtered into my mind. Then and there I would have died in spite of the screen, but my blaster was in my hand and in spite of the hideous blazing of her hypnotic eyes, I managed to judge and sentence her. My blaster flamed and she slumped behind her desk—dead.

It was the first time I had killed a woman. I became sick momentarily, but my regret was little. The air still seemed to crackle with the malignant hatred of thought...

YOU LIVE ONLY

While death is a normal fear for most men, Dick Enson faced it with a grim hope — for only thus could he continue to live . . .



"I SHOT HIM through the heart," the big man said. "He fell and I put another bullet through his heart and two into his head."

I got my feet off the desk in a hurry and straightened up my spine. Kaler looked like a nice well-balanced sort. It just proved you never could tell.

"Mr. Kaler," I said, "the sign on

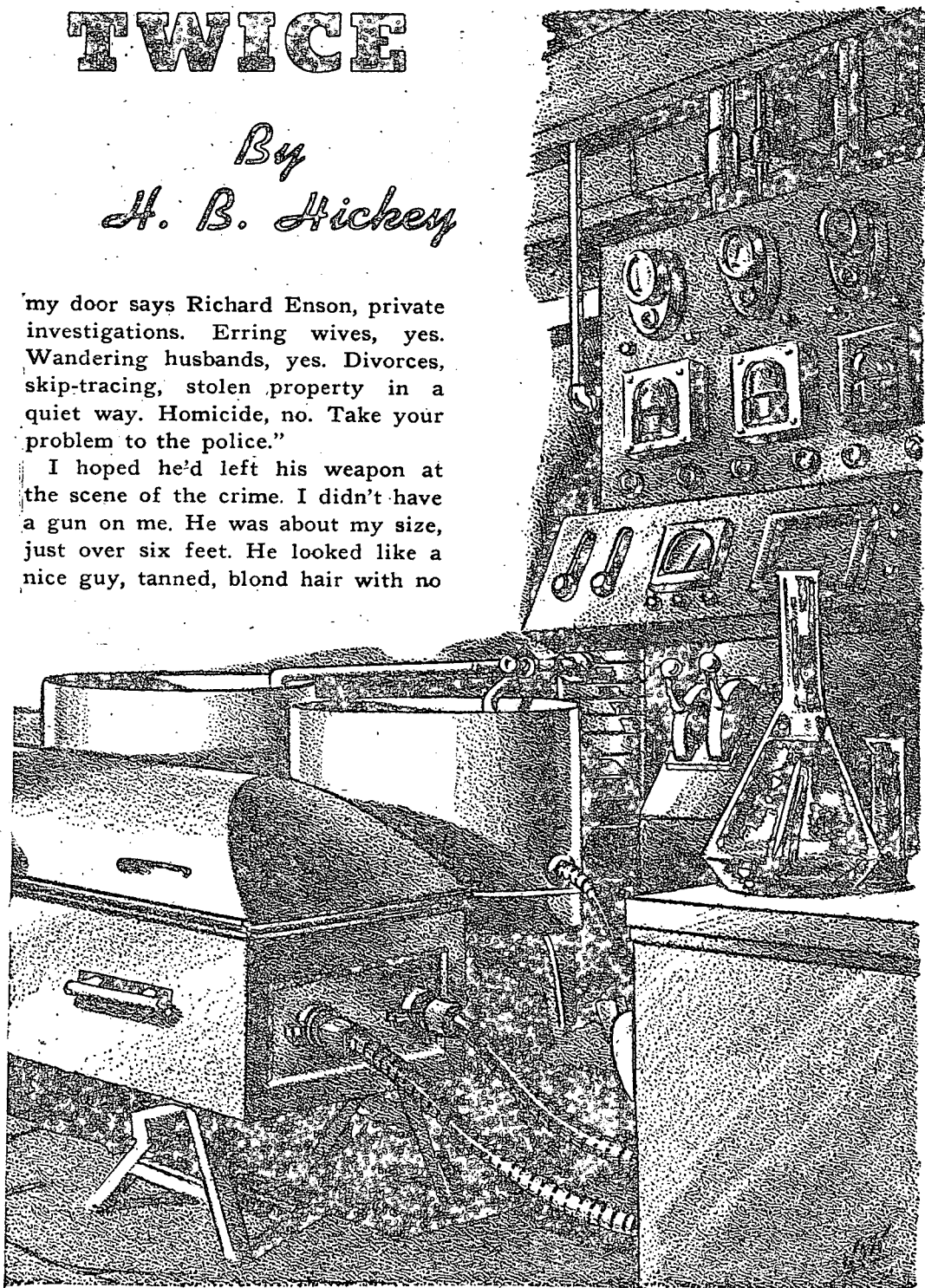
He never really knew what hit him. Death claimed his body even before it struck the floor.

TWICE

By
H. B. Hickey

my door says Richard Enson, private investigations. Erring wives, yes. Wandering husbands, yes. Divorces, skip-tracing, stolen property in a quiet way. Homicide, no. Take your problem to the police."

I hoped he'd left his weapon at the scene of the crime. I didn't have a gun on me. He was about my size, just over six feet. He looked like a nice guy, tanned, blond hair with no



dandruff showing on the collar of his expensive blue suit. I was sorry Sherry had let him in.

"Please, Mr. Enson, hear me out," he said, spreading his hands.

"My listening time comes high." I hoped it would discourage him.

It didn't. "I can afford it."

"Shoot," I said, and could have bitten my tongue.

"As I said, I put four bullets into Aleko's most vital organs. When I was certain he was dead I pocketed my gun and let myself out of his study.

"I then went down the stairway and opened the outer door to leave. And met him coming in."

"Him?" I said. "Who?"

"Aleko."

Nuts. But absolutely, indubitably nuts. I swallowed drily and choked on it. I coughed and coughed. It looked like Kaler was coming around the desk to hit me on the back and I waved him away. It was a good excuse to ring for Sherry.

She came in about two years later. She stood in the doorway with the light behind her, her golden hair like a halo.

I'd told her a thousand times to either wear a slip or come through the door sideways. It always took a male client's mind off business, and made the women so jealous they took their work elsewhere.

"Water," I told her, and gave her a high sign.

Kaler caught the sign. "Please," he said. "I know you think I'm crazy. I am not. If you called the police they'd find nothing amiss."

Then he reached into a pocket and hauled out a neat .38 automatic and tossed it on the desk in front of me. It was a nice gesture. I felt lots better.

"Skip it, honey," I told Sherry. "A misunderstanding."

THE DOOR closed behind her and I gave him my full attention. Maybe his mind was in good shape. I doubted his glandular system. He hadn't blinked an eye at Sherry.

"Let's start over," I said. "You killed Aleko. Then you met him coming in. How many of him are there?"

"Seven or eight, I should think."

Oh, no, I said to myself. It wasn't fair. Here I was, thirty-five years old and decent looking in a rugged way. Women liked me and clients paid me good fees. And he comes in and makes me feel I've got ping pong balls bouncing around in my head.

"It started during the war," Kaler said. I nodded numbly and he went on. "George Aleko was a physicist, brilliant but too immersed in metaphysics. He and Armand Ferris and I worked together on a project."

"Where is Ferris now?"

"Aleko killed him."

Just like that. At least one I wouldn't have to worry about. I wondered what Kaler did for a living. I asked...and he told me.

"I invent machines of duplication. For instance, such as those which produce a given card from millions when another card is placed in them. Also a machine which can read blueprints and set machinery to work producing what the blueprints specify.

"Aleko, Ferris and I worked together on a device to reproduce exactly, and many times over, the fortuitous and random gamma radiations from a bit of radioactive material."

"Succeed?" I asked.

"No. I found out later why we didn't. But that is getting ahead of my story."

AT ANY RATE, Kaler went on, the three had parted. They all lived in Chicago. But they hadn't liked each other too well. What with Ferris being a biochemist, their fields were different. Their paths didn't cross again.

Until two years later. "Then, one day, Aleko called on me at my office. He asked me to build for him a machine which could receive a welter of radiation and electrical impulses and discharge them in a certain order, and always the same order, into any mass or substance.

"He knew what he wanted, and was able to convey it to me. I told him the machine would have to be enormous. It would cost a fortune.

"Apparently he had the fortune. He gave me a check for one hundred thousand dollars."

"At last," I said. "Back on dry land. One hundred thousand dollars is something I can understand."

He grinned wryly. "I tried to simplify. Guess I didn't do so well."

"At any rate—"

"I built the machine. It took a year. It was large, combining an electronic calculator and other components. It cost a fortune; much more than Aleko's first check.

"In the meantime, I ran into Ferris one day. It turned out he was doing some work for Aleko. Something about a breakdown of chemical constituents of a complex organism, down to infinitely small traces."

"You mentioned that you too were working for Aleko?"

"No. I saw no reason to do so. Well, he went his way, I went mine. I didn't see him for about six months. The next time was at a dinner honoring a mutual acquaintance. I asked about his work for Aleko. Ferris had that very day turned over the com-

pleted job to him.

"The next morning Ferris was dead. Murdered. By Aleko."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. I know. And now, to the job I want you to do for me."

He was just taking it for granted I was going to do his job. But at the moment I didn't want to argue with him. I let him ramble.

"I want you to find George Aleko."

"All seven or eight of him?"

"Naturally. More, if there are more. I want the exact address of each one."

He dug a folder out of his pocket and tossed it to me. I opened it. There were three pictures of a man, three different poses. He wasn't handsome in any of them.

He had thinning hair, pop eyes, a broad brow that bulged. His chin was almost non-existent, fading into a long neck. One of Aleko was bad enough; the thought of seven or eight of him was repugnant.

"One question," I said. "Why did you try to kill him?"

"Because he tried to kill me. He's tried several times."

"Any idea where he lives? Or lived?"

"Just one address. But that one I killed today."

Kaler got up and dug out a folded banknote and tossed it on my desk. I unfolded it. There was a picture of Salmon P. Chase on it. Ten thousand bucks, in one chunk.

"To spur you on," Kaler said. "Keep in touch with me."

FOR QUITE a while after he'd gone I just sat and studied that greenback. This was one piece of artwork I knew was valuable. It hurt me to tuck it in an envelope and write Kaler's name across the front.

I took it out to Sherry.

"Get it to him by special messenger," I said. "If he calls, I'm not in. If he comes in, the same. And give me a double buzz to warn me."

"Uh huh." She shifted her gum from one cheek to the other. "And where you going now?"

"Through for the day. It's spoiled for me." I made a grab for her and she ducked. "And just for that you work till six."

Then I went out and took the elevator down. My favorite bar was a block away, down Michigan Boulevard, and I needed a couple of fast drinks.

There are two entrances to the building. Coming out of the elevator, I headed for the one on Michigan. There was a man standing near the revolving doors, pretending to read a paper.

He had pop eyes and a bulging forehead. A receding chin.

I didn't stop too short, but just like I had maybe forgot something. I looked up at the ceiling. I turned around and headed for the other entrance.

The building lobby curves sharply. Once around the curve I ran fast.

There was a man standing at that door too. He was pretending to read a paper. He had pop eyes and a bulging brow.

My mouth was full of cotton. I needed that fast drink twice as fast. But that building had only two exits and I'd run out of them.

Only one thing to do. I walked right past him and went on out. He followed me but I wasn't too worried. It was still light and there were hundreds of people around. I got enough of them between us so he couldn't get a good shot if he wanted one.

WITH A few drinks under my belt it still didn't mean much. Maybe I'd been wrong; there are plenty of people who look alike. Maybe I'd been right but twins are not so uncommon.

I'd already turned the case down, but just for kicks I called a friend at Homicide. "Ever hear of an Armand Ferris?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? All day I've been working on that one."

"What happened to him?"

"He passed away. Of a hole in the head. What do you know about Armand Ferris, Dick?"

"Not a thing. When did this happen?"

"Yesterday. Now, listen—"

I wasn't listening. I'd put the phone back on the hook. I looked out of the window. Aleko wasn't in sight.

Which didn't mean a great deal. I looked down the bar at the bartender. He knew me from prohibition days when the place had been a speakeasy. I caught his eye and he came on down to where I sat.

"You keep a heater handy?" I said. He thought a second and finally nodded.

"I left mine at the office," I told him. "Would you get too lonely without yours tonight?"

"Not too lonely. Come down to the end."

I went down to the end of the bar and he came along with his bar towel over his arm. He leaned over to whisper in my ear and something fell into my coat pocket.

It was a comfort to me, a great comfort. I went out and glanced around and there was no Aleko. Foolishness, I thought, and hailed a cruising cab. I gave the cabbie the address of the small hotel where I lived

and then settled back in the seat.

"Nice evening," the cabbie said.

Ordinarily I don't mind taxi chatter, but tonight I wasn't talkative. I let him know it by answering with a grunt. He took the hint and kept his peace while we rolled along the dark streets behind Chicago's Gold Coast. About three blocks from my hotel he opened up again.

"Got trouble with your wife, pal?"

"Got no wife," I said. "Why?"

"There's a tail on one of us. Don't think it's me."

"You sure?"

"See for yourself."

I straightened up so I could look out the rear view mirror. There was a car behind us, all right. It wasn't too close, not too far.

"Should I lose him?"

"No," I said. "I don't think this bell is tolling for me."

Even so, I slipped the bartender's gun out of my pocket, made sure it was loaded and the safety off, and laid it on my lap. The car behind didn't come any closer, even falling back.

False alarm, I thought. I dug out my fare and started to hand it to the driver as we slid to a stop in front of the hotel.

Then it happened. There was a car parked just ahead of us. The door opened suddenly and a man popped out. At the same time there was a squeal of brakes and another car was behind us. It was beautiful timing. We were pinned.

I didn't have time for more than one glimpse. I didn't need more than that. You couldn't miss those pop eyes. But I was more interested in the gun each man held.

I crossed them up. I came out of the cab. And I came out with my finger on the trigger. I snapped one fast shot. It was too fast for good

results as far as hitting anyone.

But it scared them. As fast as they'd come out they were back in again. They'd left their motors running. One pulled forward. The other backed and then swung around us.

I started back into the cab. No use. The driver had ducked down, killing his motor. I tapped him on the shoulder.

"School's out. You can go home."

WHEN I walked into that lobby I was boiling. If there's one thing I hate, it's assassination, especially when the attempted assassinee is myself.

"I thought I heard a shot," the desk clerk said.

"Backfire," I told him.

Then I started running. There's a long hall past the desk, and it ends in a fireglass door with a light above it. There was a face pressed against the door, a face I was getting dammed sick of seeing.

When I got to the door the face was gone. It was senseless to chase out into the dark. I turned around and came back.

I took the phone book off the clerk's desk and looked up Kaler's number. Within thirty seconds I had him on the line.

"Get that envelope?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I've changed my mind. Put it in your pocket and bring it down to my office. Right now."

"You've seen Aleko!"

"Several of him," I admitted.

"Tell you more about it later."

And hung up. Then I began to think about it. I thought about it while I waited for another cab, while I was riding back to the office.

And the more I thought about it the clammier got the feeling that had

been growing inside me. I was angry, but I was also beginning to get scared. There was something here that wasn't in the natural order of things, something I couldn't understand.

WHEN KALER came into the office I had all the lights on. He walked in and I pointed to a chair and said, "Sit." He sat.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We'll start with my questions," I said. "First, why didn't you go to the police when Ferris was killed?"

"What good would it do? Suppose they arrested Aleko. Which one would they arrest? And what if they tried, convicted, and executed him? There will always be more."

"And *that*," I told him, "is something we are going to discuss right now. With no double talk. Either that or I quit the case; and throw you to the cops for concealing information about a murder."

"No!" He jumped out of his chair. "You don't realize what's involved!"

I didn't move an eyelash. "Sit down," I said. "Start talking. And talk straight."

"Maybe you'll believe me now," Kaler said, settling back. "This afternoon you wouldn't have. I didn't believe it myself at first."

"As I told you, our work during the war failed. It was Aleko's fault. I thought he was cracked, too interested in immortality and the transmigration of souls to have his mind on his work. But I didn't realize how much Aleko's fault meant until three days ago, the day he came to get the finished machine."

"It was after hours at my plant. I was alone. The machine was on a dolly, ready to roll. Aleko came to the office and said he had a truck in

back. I unlocked the doors.

"Before I could see the truck or any of the men, Aleko had steered me back to my office to write out a final payment. I offered him a drink and he accepted. Later I realized he had accepted only to keep me occupied."

"But he's not a drinking man. Three drinks and he was off on a metaphysical gambit. I stood it as long as I could and then told him I thought that kind of stuff was hogwash."

Kaler paused and smiled faintly. "Mr Enson, do you believe in immortality?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's possible, but nothing's ever achieved it."

Kaler nodded. "Just about what I answered to the question. It has been achieved!"

"By whom?" I demanded.

"By a lowly thing called protozoa, a simple one-celled creature. It multiplies by dividing itself into two identical creatures. So you see, as Aleko pointed out, that the original primordial protozoa has died and is yet still alive, repeated in infinite number!"

"And now Aleko believed he could do the same with himself! I said he was crazy; he called me a fool. He had stalled our work with Ferris because we were getting close to the answer. And now, unknowingly, I had made for him the machine which would help render him immortal."

"And more than that, Mr. Enson, I had built the machine which would make him master of the world! It was insane."

"Not so insane," I said. "Not if the idea works. The guy will sheerly outnumber the rest of us!"

SO, THE idea had worked. A brilliant mind, multiplied many times. And each replica in complete rapport with the others, each knowing what the others knew and gathering more knowledge every day.

Brilliant minds, and twisted ones. Not stopping at murder, not fearing death, Aleko was bound to succeed. Give him time and he'd even manage to duplicate Kaler's machine.

Then, more and more Alekos, each one twisted, each one brilliant and growing more twisted and more brilliant every day. And against them only one man—myself.

Sure, I could go to the police. But I wouldn't, for exactly the same reason Kaler hadn't. There are plenty of nuts around, and we would just be two prize specimens to them. Kaler knew Aleko had killed Ferris, but he couldn't prove it.

Kaler wasn't going to be much help in this, either. He was bright enough, but not in the way that counted here. Besides, one of these days Kaler was going to turn up dead.

And so was I. I began to sweat under my collar. Suppose I managed to run down Aleko, one of him anyway. No good. I had to get all of him, and pretty darned quick.

In my mind he was like the protozoa Kaler had mentioned, constantly dividing, endlessly multiplying. It didn't matter if one died, there were always plenty more.

There was only one answer: stop them from multiplying! I had to get to the source, and that was the machine.

Kaler must have realized the same thing. But he didn't know how to find the machine. Neither did I, of course, but at least I had some idea of where to start looking.

Kaler hadn't seen the truck that took the machine away. So he was finished. But *I* wasn't. It takes special trucks to move large machinery, and there aren't too many firms in that business.

Also, there was the matter of electricity. It took a lot to run that machine. Aleko would be limited to areas where large users of juice were common. He'd be a new user, probably, in which case there'd be a record at the electric company. There were ways of getting to those records.

Give me a day, give me two days, and I'd find that machine. But that was only half the problem. I had to get Aleko, and every one of his duplicates.

But how? I couldn't possibly run every one down. There had to be some way of getting them to come to me. I had to find a lever, a threat, to force them out into the open. A threat to one wasn't enough. I had to have a sword to hang over their heads, so that each and every one would be in mortal danger.

And the answer to that was—the machine. Destroy the machine and I'd destroy Aleko. His immortality was gone.

I picked up the phone book and looked up the heading, Machinery, Moving. I'd been right. There weren't too many firms, not more than I could cover in a day.

But what if I *didn't* find the machine? I could still get Aleko. All that was necessary was that he *think* I knew where it was. He'd come out after me, and plenty fast.

I grabbed up the phone, dialed a newspaper, got the want ad department. I ordered a personal notice inserted on the morning after next, to appear in the earliest edition only. It was a simple notice, brief and to

the point: *Kaler—have found machine. Meet me behind Grant Park bandshell eight-thirty this morning. Enson.*

After I'd called the other morning papers I called Kaler and told him about the notice. I didn't think Aleko would miss it. From what Kaler had told me he figured to read everything, learn everything.

Then I said good night to Kaler, tore out the page of machinery movers from the phone book and stuck it in my pocket. I went downstairs, made sure I wasn't being tailed, and hied myself to the nearest hotel to hole up for a day.

SEVEN-THIRTY of an autumn morning is often unpleasant along Chicago's lake front. The wind was raw and I felt chilled without a topcoat as I parked the car and walked toward the bandshell.

It was the perfect spot. There is shrubbery and some trees close by, but around the back of the big shell you're in a clearing, out in the open. It's a lonely spot, nice for a murder.

And I was the bait. I smoked one cigarette after another as I waited. Time passed slowly. More time, more cigarettes. And then at last it was almost eight-thirty.

I looked up. A car had pulled to the curb along the drive. A moment later there was another car. Then more. I looked ahead, toward Buckingham Fountain to the north. Three men were walking toward me.

At my back, the big shell protected me. But from the other three sides I was being hemmed in. It was a frightening thing to watch them come on, each one dressed differently but each one with the same face. There were eight of them in all.

I had a gun, but I wasn't ready to use it. I wouldn't unless I had to.

They were running now. This time Aleko wouldn't miss. He'd kill, but he was no gunman. He had to get close to make certain.

They were almost on me when Kaler stepped out of the clump of bushes he'd been hiding in since before I got there. He had a gun in each hand.

"Aleko!" he called. They turned, startled.

Kaler was a good shot, and they were sitting ducks. Seven shots and there were seven figures down on the yellowish grass. The eighth one ran and I started after him.

"Let him go," Kaler called.

And he himself darted off at a slight tangent. I followed him. Within seconds Aleko was in a car, pulling away fast, and we were fifty yards behind him.

"That was murder, plain and cold-blooded," I told Kaler as we swung onto the Outer Drive with tires screeching.

"I'll take the responsibility," he grated.

I shut up and gritted my teeth and prayed as we roared down the Drive at eighty miles an hour. It had been a nice trick until Kaler had opened fire.

Suddenly the car ahead slowed and swung off toward the industrial area to the west. Kaler let out a triumphant, "Ah!"

"You let him go on purpose," I said.

"THE MACHINE!" Kaler snapped. "He's got to get to it. Only one of him now and he's got to get to it!"

He was right. Aleko drove like a madman, took corners on two wheels, but Kaler stuck like a leech.

Aleko should have figured Kaler's game. But he didn't. He should have ditched the car and taken off on

foot. But he didn't do that either.

Suddenly there was a screech of brakes and Aleko was at the curb in front of an old building. We got there almost on his heels, but still not fast enough.

A big door opened and Aleko was through it. It slammed in our faces as we raced up. A lock clicked.

"Around the side!" I said. "There are windows."

Kaler went through the window first, shattering the glass with his elbow. I went in right behind him. We were in a semigloom, on the main floor. Toward the front a stairway led up to a second floor. There had been a tool shop here once and I could smell the grease and the metal as I ran behind Kaler toward the stairs.

Aleko was almost to the top. Kaler had his gun out and snapped a shot. I saw Aleko falter, then go on. He was out of sight. Then we were taking the stairs two at a time. Kaler hit the top first.

Splinters flew as a bullet chewed wood over Kaler's head. The gun in his hand roared and roared again until my ears ached. Then it stopped firing and he was standing there, motionless.

"Got him," he said softly.

He had indeed. Twenty feet away Aleko lay, down at the base of a dingy wall. No more immortality for him; he was dead as any man had ever been.

"And there's the machine," I said. Kaler was already staring at it.

He had only built part of it, but the part he had built took up half the big room. Next to it was a smaller machine, a maze of tubes and wires. And there were the chemicals Ferris had worked out, vat upon vat of them.

And each machine, and every vat, and every wire and tube was connected with a cabinet the size and shape of a coffin that occupied the center of the room in the midst of the weird maze.

"There it is," Kaler whispered. He looked at me and smiled strangely and said, "Thank you, Enson."

"Wait," I said. The gun was pointed right at my heart.

"No. It was a clever trick to get Aleko out into the open. But it was the machine I wanted, you see. Aleko had a wonderful idea, but I can use it to so much better advantage."

"It was you who killed Ferris," I said.

"Of course. And now I'm going to kill you. There's only room for one immortal, you know."

I MADE a grab for him, but it was no use. The gun went off in my face and there was a shattering blackness as my forehead caved in. Kaler was laughing as the thing that had been Dick Enson toppled to the floor.

He was still laughing as I came out from behind the machine and swiped him across the back of the head and knocked him forward. The gun fell from his hand and I kicked it out of reach.

"It wasn't all a trick," I said as Kaler got to his knees. "I found the machine last night. I was hiding here while Aleko produced a duplicate of himself. I had a hunch that this might happen, so after Aleko left I used the machine myself."

Kaler was still dazed, but he had enough yet to make a grab at the gun on the floor. He actually got his hand on it and was coming around. I had no choice but to kill him.

For a moment afterward I just stood and looked at the machine. It

was a wonderful thing, the kind of thing bound to give any man ideas. It was even giving me ideas.

Then I looked down at Aleko and Kaler. They'd had the same ideas. And look what had happened to them.

I turned and pumped a shot into several vats. Then I tore loose a metal pipe and went to work. When I walked out the machine was a total wreck.

Sure, the papers were full of the story. It was a three-week wonder. But nobody knew anything, and I

wasn't offering information nobody knew I had. I let it go at that.

Sherry had a notion, of course, because she'd met Kaler. But just a notion. She's never said a word.

And I've found other things to discuss with Sherry. In a more quiet manner than formerly. In fact I've changed quite a bit. Once in a while Sherry will give me a strange glance.

"You've changed, Dick," she'll say. "You're not the same man I used to know."

Dead men seldom are....

THE END

CHANCE...



By June Lurie



WHAT A miracle of irony! How the Fates must have laughed! The fanfare and the shouting that accompanied the first rocket to the Moon, now turns a little dry in our mouths when we think of what it did.

It's only nineteen eighty-three now, and it'll be a long time—at least several decades the slide-rule boys say—before we are able to do much interplanetary journeying. And when we do that traveling we're going to have to be mighty apologetic to the Martians. Oh, yes, there are Martians, we know that. In fact it'll probably happen that they'll beat us to the punch—and land on Earth first. Let's hope they're mighty understanding.

Certainly it was a pure accident. It couldn't have happened in a thousand million years. The laws of chance and probability are strictly against such a coincidence. It's unheard of—but it happened.

Perhaps you can remember the shouting and the gayety and the happiness with which that first rocket was launched. Ten years isn't a long time. Remember the way they ballyhooed it? It was war-headed with two tons of magnesium powder and potassium chlorate mixed with powdered chalk. They wanted a flash of light—which they got—and they wanted a whitish spot on the Moon's surface—which they got...along with a little red...

The remote-controlled rocket took off like nobody's business. A million hearts followed it over the video, a billion prayers hoped that it would be a success. Man's ego got such a boost that night, that it had to be. Well, of course it was!

Everybody who could beg, borrow or steal a telescope or a pair of opera glasses watched the Moon's surface for zero hour. And plenty of people saw the brief flare of light which marked Man's successful contact with the Moon. The rocket flared up and scattered its dust, and the bigger telescopes were able to note the spot exactly.

Fine. Fine and dandy.

Five years later, Eddie Felstrom and his three men landed on the Moon. That's history too, and as great as it was and is, it didn't make as big a splash in the public consciousness as the first rocket, the one with the explosive load.

But when it returned and Eddie told his story...and when the other two rockets later confirmed it...there was a splash all right.

For the Martians had landed in a rocket right smack on the spot where our first rocket loaded with magnesium and potassium chlorate, had struck! And of course the Martian rocket and crew vanished practically. Not quite. Parts of their ship and themselves were scattered all over the moonscape. You can see the remnants in the Smithsonian. And we know that they're remarkably like us. What did they think when their rocket didn't return? We don't know yet—but we will.

But what makes it so maddening is the fact that it had to happen like some great cosmic joke. A tragic jokester, death. The first contact between interplanetary people had to be a matter of death. Why?

We think the Martians, when they come, will be reasonable. After all, they're like us, a lot like us...

THE WAGER



By A. T. Kedzie



IN THE infinite reaches of the vast tesseraet that was all space, the two entities rocked with silent laughter.

"By the gases!" roared One, "you were right! I owe you a myriad years of sheer thinking. I never thought the little mortals on Sol Three would ever guess it. But wait—it isn't done yet. They'll laugh him out of existence."

"No, no. That I don't believe," countered Two, "they're intelligent—this Urey and this Von Weizaecker will make their point—and it'll be common knowledge."

"I'll give you another fifty years but no more—then we'll see what the little devils do now that their ideas have been turned upside down."

And they drifted apart...

So might two cosmic beings view the new theories of the formation of the Solar System which have been advanced by reputable scientist Urey, of Nobel prize and heavy water fame, and by von Weizaecker, a cohort in the search for knowledge. Urey announced after intensive study that

the Earth was formed by huge clouds of dust which coalesced together then became hot and resulted in our present planet.

Furthermore to prove his theory, Urey maintains that the temperature of the Earth is increasing, not decreasing, and that this is due to the immense radiation of radioactive materials which made up the original dust.

How valid these new ideas are, remains to be seen, but it wouldn't be at all surprising if they turned out to be the truth. Sometimes in science, the oldest best-established ideas, are the very ones which are wrong.

Von Weizaecker's contribution is surprisingly similar to Urey's. He believes in the vortex formation of the System, in which masses of gas contract into vortex, spiral-shaped forms which eventually become what we know as solid matter.

Since atomic thinking has upset so many of our old, well, established ideas, we simply have to adjust to the new. It isn't hard to do—after all, these things happened a few billion years ago...

REFUGE!



By Sandy Miller



"DIRTY RAT!" The somber gray-garbed figure clenched his blaster tighter to him. He turned to his companion, a soldier of the Securities, who similarly cradled a blaster. "We'll hunt down every last one of the rotten Freemen."

Peter Lenten crouched behind the shelter of the brick wall and the hedges and shivered. Oh God, he thought, don't let it happen here. I know they'll find me, but let me just breathe country air again. I can't stand anymore of this concrete jungle.

He stiffened with resolve. He clenched and unclenched his fingers around the butt of the heavy old-fashioned automatic pistol. The Proles had turned the country into a dreary, morbid police state, in which to think was to die. Not to conform was the equivalent of a death sentence. Well, all right, he wasn't going to conform. Maybe he'd die, but he wouldn't become like those thoughtless automatons who were hunting him down. Give them a meal and a coat and a gun, and they'd kill their own mothers!

Bitter and heart-sick he crouched in his makeshift shelter until their softening footsteps told him they were going. There

was a little hope, just a little, that he might run on one of the Free Bands, if he could get out of the drab city. But everything was so closely patrolled that it was almost impossible.

Peter Lenten straightened up, looked around and despite the darkness started off at a quick lope. The gaunt images of factory buildings on the city's rim became fewer as he went. Abruptly he stumbled into a figure. The reek of the man's breath was over-powering put Peter let no sound escape him. He dared not fire. He swung up the gun choppy. The man staggered and fell, too startled to cry out. Savagely Peter clubbed him again to make sure that he was out. Then he went on.

It wasn't long before there were only trees and fields and Peter Lenten knew he was free—temporarily perhaps, but he was free! Now all that remained was to hunt and somehow survive until he ran into a Free Band. They'd help him.

Peter Lenten didn't see the blaster come level thirty feet away. Peter Lenten didn't feel the vital-tearing savagery of the blaster bolt that tore through his body. A golden glow exploded in his mind. Freedom, he thought, freedom...

SWORD of PEACE

By Ward Moore



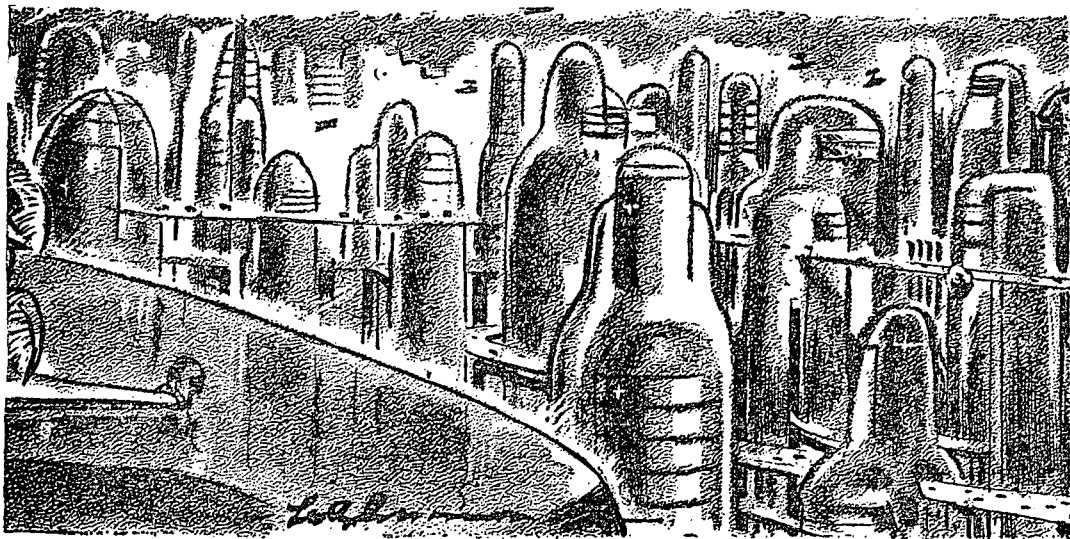
Money lenders were driven from the temple as a man preached peace. But again there were thirty pieces of silver . . .



THE FIRST mention of Isaiah MacAdam did not, of course, carry that soon to be famous name—indeed, the name did not yet exist—and the small notice in the local papers, too insignificant to be aired on the radio or carried by press wires, did not hint its connection with that strange figure whose shadow was so soon to be cast over the entire world.

Like this: Los Angeles: An outlying branch of the Bank of America was robbed today under circumstances which have baffled the police. At 11:25 AM all employees of the branch and three depositors present

at the time, experienced a feeling of extreme lassitude followed almost immediately by loss of consciousness. All present awoke, as from a deep sleep, between 11:40 and 11:45. It was discovered that bills and coins in the tellers' cages were missing, though no checks, money orders or securities had been touched. Apparently no attempt had been made to enter the vault which was standing open. The police have grilled all employees and the three depositors, but the only discrepancy in their statements is the assertion of a guard that there were four, not three, depositors at 11:25. Announcement of an arrest



They watched as the ship traced its strange message across the afternoon sky . . .

is expected shortly. The loss is approximately \$11,000."

That was the beginning. The few who saw the story laughed and no doubt said it was a clever conspiracy by the clerks and tellers with three outside accomplices. Everyone was more interested in the newest phase of the cold war.

The next episode caught the attention of many more, both because of its more spectacular nature and because it was coupled by the papers with the first, and played up. The Los Angeles Federal Reserve Bank was held up under identical circumstances. Of course, "held up" is a misnomer; everyone in the huge building went to sleep about ten in the morning, not to revive till almost three. Messengers, visitors, salesmen, business people entering on errands between those times found, as soon as they went through the massive doors, clerks and porters slumped as though dead or drugged. Before they could raise an alarm, they too experienced a sense of weakness followed by unconsciousness. They too awoke, without any ill after effects, within a few minutes of the original victims. This time the loss was nearly \$3,000,000.

There was no question of conspiracy here. Some of the most trusted officers of the Federal Reserve, men of impeccable character and distinguished reputation, were among the anesthetized. It was robbery, not a doubt of it, robbery under baffling and frightening circumstances. Someone had discovered a new technique in larceny, and if the highwayman could repeat his feat, as it seemed he could, no bank in the world was safe from his mysterious depredations.

Many attempts were made to explain the trick of the robberies. Mass

hypnosis was the most popular, but this was discounted by the late-comers' falling under the spell as surely as those there all along. Rays, electronic impulses, invisible gasses were all offered as solutions to the enigma. Scientists were interviewed respectfully if uncomprehendingly on their opinion of what Winchell called "the current doughziness" and the interviews were printed on the front pages. The Attorney-General announced that every effort of the FBI would be engaged to probe the mystery and put the perpetrator in the Federal Penitentiary.

I was then, as I had been for some time, research chemist at Ribbon Plastics, one of the largest manufacturers of gadgets and war materials in the country. Mr. Joseph Ribbon, president of the corporation, summoned me to his office. "You're a scientist—what's this all about?"

"Well, Joe," I began—nearly all the employees of Ribbon Plastics called the boss Joe; I don't know exactly why, for he was neither likable nor friendly, and there was a rumor he wrote poetry in secret, but it was a custom, perhaps to make up for our substandard pay—"well, Joe, I don't know that my being a scientist helps. I've been working a long time on cellulose and its products; nothing there to explain this."

"If these robberies keep up we'll be out of business; money be worth a dime. Anarchy! Chaos! No market for plastics!"

"Sorry I can't help you," I said cheerfully and went back to my laboratory. I put a fresh pot of coffee on the electric plate—I like it fresh and often—lit a cigarette, and opened the afternoon paper. If Ribbon Plastics was on the way out, I might as well take it easy while I still had a job.

THE FRONT page was almost evenly divided between the latest U. S.-Soviet tension and more speculations about the "daylight sleep robberies". I glanced through the news section, read the comics attentively, and then, in sardonic mood, turned to the want ads, something I hadn't done for fifteen years. Four solid columns were devoted to a single ad—mostly white space, for the text was short, though large and black.

MEN, WOMEN & CHILDREN
INTERESTED IN
WORLD PEACE
WORLD GOVERNMENT
WORLD SANITY.
PERMANENT JOBS FOR ALL
TOP PAY TO START
EXPERIENCE IMPOSSIBLE,
THEREFORE UNNECESSARY.
PERSONS OF GOODWILL
APPLY TO ADAM
Box 131313

Well, well, I thought, maybe I won't have to worry after all; there seems to be a position for me with Mr. Adam. I must say he's reckless with his cash. To tell the truth, I wasn't greatly impressed, certain it was some freakish stunt by one of the irresponsibles who bob up periodically in our great city.

But the words "World Peace" and "World Government" for some reason set me thinking, perhaps because my mind was idle at the moment, back five or six years, when there were two of us in the research department at Ribbon Plastics. Oh, plenty of others have been a little crazy on the subject of universal peace and global federation, but I don't think I'd ever known one quite so fanatical as Ira Atz. Good wood chemist too, one of the best—between ourselves, and strictly out of earshot

of Joe Ribbon, I wasn't even in the same class—Ira had just two interests in life. One was the eradication of nationalism, the other was lignin. That was his specialty, lignin research. He was bound and determined to prove that lignin was the most important part of wood; my cellulose was nothing but a toy, a byproduct; lignin was the tree itself. And he was going to do things with lignin, make it produce everything coal tar did and a lot more. Lignin was going to change the world—a one-world, without nations or boundaries.

I hadn't seen Ira for a couple of years—not since Joe Ribbon fired him personally. If Ira had been smart, like me, he would have kept Joe happy with a new "discovery" every now and then that Ribbon Plastics could market for a few hundred thousand. But he was a pigheaded idealist, intent only on finding out what made lignin tick, down to the last chemical combination. So, full of world federation and wood chemistry, he went out of our lives.

Of course I forgot about good old Ira immediately. Next day there was another big robbery, this time netting \$400,000. And Mr. Adam's ad disappeared. Instead, a news item, announced that the paper's offices had been swamped with mail and the appeal would not be run again until the volume of letters slowed.

For almost a month there were no new developments. Joe Ribbon's blood pressure eased, business went on, and I decided it didn't matter about Mr. Adam's advertisement since I still had a job after all. Then there occurred the affair at Lockheed.

THE HOLDUP of the giant aircraft factory, a plant covering many acres and employing thousands of workers, was instantly acknowl-

edged the most amazing criminal act of the century. The magnitude of the operation, the boldness of the scheme, the precision of the execution and the nature of the loot caught the public imagination as the bank robberies had not. In daylight, this great plant, situated in a populous industrial district, was entered by an unknown number of persons; guards, clerks, workers and executives were sent into the now notorious coma, and every finished aircraft flown off into the blandly expressionless sky. It was as spectacular as it was incredible.

But while there was no sign of the vanished planes, there were, for the first time, faint clues on the scene of the outrage. Clues pointing to nothing tangible, but at least partially dispelling the more fantastic theories, such as those predicating invisible men or visitors from other planets using strange powers.

Some of the guards stated that just before the moment of drowsiness they were approached by strangers who did not appear to have proper credentials to enter the factory and who seemed to be stalling for time before stating their business. Several guards spoke, not too certainly, of a sensation of dampness prior to being overcome. And two employees who were strongly allergic to sedatives reported themselves violently sick afterward. This was the only time the anesthetic had produced an ill-effect.

Meager clues, nothing to set against apprehension that shook the whole country. Martial law was declared in Los Angeles County, enormous rewards were posted for the apprehension of the robbers; the army, marines, State Guard, the FBI and many other agencies of government were put on full time duty tracking down the criminals.

In the excitement, one newspaper reporter's work got rude treatment; what was to have been a front-page story was buried in the second section. Like many others, the reporter had been interested in the want ad inserted by Mr. Adam a month before. But his interest was professional; he smelled a story in it. He had therefore written to the box number, first finding out from the ad-taker that it had been paid for by one I. Adam, with an address in the Edendale district. Hanging around the classified desk as inconspicuously as possible, he saw the contents of the box—a bulging mailsack—picked up by a uniformed messenger who carried it to a long-abandoned and condemned factory building on North Broadway. Questioned by the reporter afterward, the messenger said the order had come in by telephone and he had delivered the sack to an ordinary looking man of perhaps between thirty and forty who gave him a dollar tip.

The newsman hesitated whether to bluff his way into the factory or wait for a possible reply to his letter of application. He decided to wait; late that night his phone rang.

"This is Adam."

"Yes, Mr. Adam."

"Not Mister; just Adam."

"Yes... Adam?"

"That's better now: you're serious about a fulltime job for peace and world government?"

"Oh yes, M—Adam."

"Good. Married?"

"No, sir."

"No 'sirs'—just Adam. Member of the national guard or military reserve?"

"No... Adam."

"Religion?"

"Does that matter?" asked the reporter.

"If you mean, do certain affilia-

tions bar employment, the answer is no. But we have many duties, not all similar, and Muslims, say, might prefer activities not agreeable to Quakers."

"Episcopalian," said the reporter briefly.

"Can you be here at seven tomorrow morning?" Adam named the North Broadway address.

NEXT MORNING, still regretting his curtailed sleep, the reporter found two or three hundred applicants in front of the factory, as well as sightseers, cops keeping order, and fellow journalists. He resigned himself to hours of waiting, when a hitherto unnoted loudspeaker said hollowly, "All bonafide applicants come in and wait. Applicants with appointments only." The line started moving inside the empty building, dusty and echoing.

The applicants cracked the usual feeble jokes, shuffled feet, looked half hopeful, half sheepish. Outside, the loudspeaker droned, "No more interviews till two o'clock. No more interviews till two o'clock. No more..." It was evidently a transcription, and a nervewracking one.

The feature story described how the men and women were sifted into smaller and smaller groups by means of questions from another loudspeaker until finally he found himself in a tiny office, bare and dusty as the rest of the building. Facing him was a man who made the messenger's "ordinary looking" seem remarkably accurate. Possibly just under forty, of medium height, on the lean side of plumpness, light brown or dark blue eyes behind glasses, fair complexion, small nose, rounded chin, a few gray hairs—there was nothing to make him stand out from hundreds of thousands. He spoke brusquely, not giving the impression of

arrogance, but rather of being inescapably pressed for time.

The questions were the usual ones, interspersed with others less customary. Was he free to travel? Willing to take orders? Any orders? Any orders at all? How sincere was his desire for world peace? Willing to risk his life for it? The reporter got the impression the questions were intended to assay his sincerity as well as his value, but that the questioner was no trained psychologist. In five minutes the interview was over; the newsman was told he would be notified if he were wanted. He felt somehow he had failed to pass a test.

That was about all, except for checking the various loose ends, which was what had delayed the printing of the story. The factory had been rented to a Mr. Ivan Adam, on the understanding it would be vacated on short notice and not used industrially. Mr. Adam had paid three month's rent in cash, offered no references, never asked for any refund although the factory was used only for a week. The Edendale address was an apartment house where no Adam, Adams, or similar name was known. All Ivan Adams or Adamses the reporter was able to run down were positively not the man on the phone or in the dusty office. He did succeed in reaching some of the other applicants, but their stories only duplicated his. He guessed these were, like himself, weeded out; those accepted by Adam not being available.

Well, I thought, finishing this pointless report, the paper must be hard up for copy. Like others I promptly forgot the want ad and its aftermath.

But not the Lockheed holdup and its consequences. The first few times the stolen planes, identifiable by

their lack of CAA numerals, landed at airports for gas, attempts were made from prolonging the refuelling while the authorities were called to struggles with the pilots and shots by zealous attendants. All were baffled by sudden drowsiness, followed by sleep. No worthwhile identifications were secured; the pilots seemed of all ages and types.

IT WAS one of those hot, cloudless September days when the deafeningly blue sky screams for some contrast to relieve its monotonous uniformity, that sophisticated watchers, mostly small boys, were startled by something new in the way of sky-writing over the air of Los Angeles. Those who could anticipate every word of an Honest John announcement and knew the proper placing of the dot in Pepsi Cola were at a loss to identify the white smoke.

GR.

The watchers were fascinated. A new advertiser, possibly a new product. Bets were made as the plane zoomed for the next letter.

GREAT

Great what? Everybody asked. Great bargain? Great car? Great drink? Impatience was hard to control as the plane spelled out SHALL.

Great shall...? Maybe a new car. Great Shall. Some began to remember faint rumors that the Shall Oil Company was putting out a car to boost its gas sales.

GREAT SHALL BE

This made no sense at all; opinion was divided between theories that the skywriter had his copy mixed up, that he was practising, or drunk.

However they continued to watch tolerantly while the first letters expanded into unintelligibility and the plane went on doggedly spelling out:

GREAT SHALL BE THE PEACE
OF THY CHILDREN

Everyone sighed relievedly. A nut. A religious fanatic. A screwball defiling with biblical quotations skies sacred to the immortal quips of advertisers. There was general satisfaction among the audience in labeling the skywriter and some annoyance at time wasted with such absurdities. Several camera enthusiasts directed lenses upward. When some of these pictures were published it was found the plane carried bogus CAA markings—that it was one of the planes stolen from Lockheed.

The discovery produced a terrified bewilderment. Bank robbers with a new method of undermining the rights of property were a monstrous evil; religious nuts who quoted the prophet Isaiah—the source of the words was established even before they faded—were funny, but there was nothing funny about larceny, nothing naughty about reproducing the phrases of the Old Testament. The inconsistency first confused and then enraged the man in the street; if "Isaiah", as the gang leader became popularly known, could have been identified and seized he would have been lynched with righteous dispatch.

It was soon clear that "Isaiah" guessed the public temper, for there were no more sacred texts written in the Southern California sky. The mobilization of jet fighters which had been prepared mercilessly to shoot down the pious bandit waited idly on the ground. But he brought himself into wider notice another way.

The usual Sunday afternoon crowd shuffled slowly and a trifle self-consciously toward the door of the Columbia Broadcasting studio on Sunset Boulevard. In an hour Jack Benny's coast-to-coast broadcast would be on, and those ambitious enough to squeeze inside would see and hear the comedian in person instead of having to listen through their radios.

The lucky ones filed into the seats. They were properly warmed up with commercials, community singing, musical numbers, and jokes left over from last week's program. But no sooner was the "on the air" flashed, and the famous line, "Hello again" delivered than the audience fell into a sound sleep. That this was not due to any failure of Mr. Benny's wit was confirmed by the entire cast as well as the staff of CBS joining them in slumber.

All over the country, listeners—the corners of their mouths ready with expectant smiles—were startled by "Hear, ye that are far off, what I have done; and ye that are near, acknowledge my might." This is Adam, Adam, the peace-bringer. My time is short, but the world's time is shorter still. I won't say another war will end civilization; you have heard that too often, and anyway it is questionable if civilization exists. But another war will destroy the earth, at least as far as animal life goes. As long as national sovereignty and all its trappings—armies, navies, flags; diplomats, jealousies and rivalries—continue, war is unavoidable. We have seen how nations cling to their selfish prerogatives and yield only to force. I, Adam, have that force, and I shall use it to make the world into a single nation.

"I urge you, wherever you are, to join me. Many of you have friends who are already peace-bringers, de-

voted as I am to this cause. They will approach everyone they believe ready; these will reach further out to *their* friends. Those who join with us will be well paid; in money now, in peace, happiness, prosperity and liberty soon. You need have no scruples; the domination of the world for peace will be accomplished without the taking of a single life or the injuring of a single individual. I have the means to put anyone, anywhere, into a state of suspended animation for any length of time; thus all resistance will be overcome without hurt.

"One final word. I have no personal ambitions. I desire neither to be world dictator nor world prime minister. On the day of universal peace Adam will disappear, along with the last flag, the last battleship and the last bomb."

IF THERE had been excitement before, there was frenzy now. Even before the transcription had whirled through its last groove police converged on the great studio. They pushed their way through the crowd outside, who had no idea of what was going on, past the portals, to find ushers scattered like ninepins, sleeping stiffly where they had fallen. The auditorium of the Jack Benny show was packed with a mass of slumberers; on the stage the comedian and his company were slumped over chairs or microphones. On a turntable the platter still revolved aimlessly, the needle scratching obstinately round and round a voiceless groove. There were no signs of Adam or his accomplices.

Accomplices he must have had, for it would take at least five to replace the honest technicians and see that the broadcast went through. A cordon was instantly thrown around the building to prevent anyone leaving

before establishing satisfactory identification. While the network program was continued from New York with a soothing organ recital, the police went through the auditoriums, control rooms and offices, where, besides a few souvenirs, all they found were sleepers. Or possibly, as they admitted later, the guilty ones pretending to be asleep.

It was true; when the effects of the potion wore off after half an hour and identifications were made, they picked up many miscellaneous offenders, including traffic law violators for whom bench warrants had long been out, but none who could reasonably be suspected of complicity in the outrage.

The scene was searched eagerly for clues. The record was scrutinized not only for fingerprints, but for origin. But the prints were smudged, suggesting the use of gloves, and the disc was a common make, sold by the thousand. The law was no nearer solution than before.

Isaiah Adam's purpose in interrupting the Benny broadcast succeeded. Monday's paper was largely devoted to Adam, his predecessors—like Savonarola—theories of the nature of his hypnotic agent, and a recounting of his earlier adventures, including the want ad and the investigations of the curious reporter. It also ran a strong editorial urging that something be done.

I suppose everyone expected a lull after the Jack Benny episode; I know I did. But though Adam might not be a trained psychologist in the opinion of the reporter, he was enough of one not to give the world a moment to forget him. I say the world, for by this time other countries too were concerned with what he would do next.

As Adam had promised, mysterious phone calls began coming to all sorts

of people, people connected by no obvious ties, who had no particular social, economic, political or ideological classifications. I suppose we heard only of the unsuccessful calls by the Peacebringers when patriotic and indignant citizens reported the messages to the police. The ones which recruited the recipients into Adam's organization were naturally not publicized; the dupes instead busying themselves finding still newer adherents.

And now came the period of the less spectacular raids. There was no duplication of the Lockheed raid or the seizure of CBS. Banks continued to be looted in spite of precautions, but we were becoming hardened to that. More frequently small factories, printshops, binderies suffered. The theft of much electronic equipment led authorities to believe that the building of one or more portable radio stations was in progress, and this was confirmed shortly afterward by the sudden interpolation into popular programs of quotations from Isaiah. The moment of respectful silence following a commercial would be rudely shattered by "Let the people renew their strength: let them come near; then let them speak." Pianissimo passages during symphonies were backgrounds not only for the coughs of those sufferers from chronic bronchitis who find concert halls the most congenial infirmaries, but for the thundering of, "Come near, ye nations, to hear; and hearken, ye people; let the earth hear, and all that is therein; the world, and all things that come forth of it. For the indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and his fury upon all their armies..."

Efforts to locate these mobile units by triangulation were unavailing, though flying squads were on constant alert.irate listeners wrote fu-

rious letters and hastily organized groups badgered the Federal Communications Commission. The Un-American Activities Committee reported that Isaiah Adam was the notorious Soviet agent Ivan Adamin, and demanded he be cited for contempt, tried for subversion, imprisoned for conspiracy and deported for sedition. Prominent figures stated that the free enterprise system was threatened, and the continued downward fluctuations of the stock-market were attributed to him.

IN THIS atmosphere of angry helplessness the arrest of an extremely obscure individual whose name, fittingly enough, was Jack Smith, was, at least for a moment, the grasping of something tangible. Smith made a crash landing with his two-engined plane on an airfield beside the Mississippi near Memphis. Attendants came rushing up. The pilot climbed out, as he faced them they began to feel drowsy, and relaxed, sleeping, to the ground. They did not come to for twenty minutes.

When they did they wasted no time speculating over the disabled plane or looking vaguely around for the vanished pilot, but sprinted to phone the authorities, who now exerted themselves as they never had in cases of mere murder, lynching, race riots or other minor crimes. Roadblocks were set up, the area was scouted from the skies, every inch of ground was combed for the fugitive.

When Smith was found he submitted quietly to arrest and search. The mystified police, who had been momentarily expecting the familiar symptoms of stupefaction, could only surmise that he had discarded in his flight whatever means of inducing sleep the Peacebringers carried about with them, for nothing

suggesting a container of gas, drugs, or anything similar was found on his person. Refusing to talk, he was lodged in the Memphis jail.

As the news that a follower of Isaiah Adam had been taken was shouted over the air and screamed on the headlines, the damaged plane was inspected with the utmost scientific thoroughness. As suspected, it was one of the stolen Lockheed planes, with false numerals on the wings, and it contained a powerful radio transmitter and a stock of Adam's transcriptions. But there was no sign of whatever produced the hypnosis, and the fingerprints, which were many, did not check with those on file of any known criminal.

No amount of questioning evoked anything from the prisoner beyond the admission that he was indeed a Peacebringer, and a dissertation—cut short with a blackjack by an impatient questioner—on the urgent need of everyone there joining Adam. He was put in a cell, awaiting the arrival of experts from Washington. Next morning the jailers, turnkeys and policemen woke from an unexpected and uninvited nap to find the cell door open and the prisoner gone.

In the midst of the uproar over the escape of Smith, with its inevitable charges of negligence and corruption, Isaiah Adam acted again. After the Jack Benny affair every precaution was taken against another such, but as Adam demonstrated his independence of actual entrance into the studios this watchfulness was gradually relaxed. This provided the opportunity for the interruption of a soap opera sniffing its way—by transcription—through its midweek catalepsy. Housewives, busy with vacuum cleaner and handkerchief, were startled in the midst of episode 517 of "Dick and Peter" to hear the voice of Adam, a voice rapidly be-

coming as familiar as the only slightly flatter tones of President Truman.

"This is the way, walk you in it." There is no other road to survival except the road of peace and world federation. The time has not quite come for Adam to give final warning, but it is proper to make an example to show that Adam is serious. For years there has been civil war in Greece. Listen to Adam, world: Within three months Adam will bring peace there."

OF COURSE the speech was cut off the air before it was half given, but it was reproduced in the papers and showered over the country in the first of the Peacebringers' propaganda leaflets. Although Adam's threat of imposing peace on Greece was taken as just another evidence of insanity, there was general delight in the prospect of being relieved, if only temporarily, of his presence. He could hardly expect to stop the fighting by remote control; while he was about his quixotic errand there would be no more inexplicable bankrobberies, interrupted programs, jail deliveries, or daylight sleeps.

Naturally every care was taken to prevent his departure from the United States or his arrival in Southern Europe. If private citizens were to be allowed to go around stopping wars at will, the whole structure of society might be irrevocably injured. But since no one had the remotest notion of who Isaiah Adam was or what he looked like, the embargo was difficult.

That he slipped through the cordon anyway, the world learned by a spectacular event. On June 22, the Royal Hellenic arsenal at Piraeus was destroyed in a bold "daylight sleep" raid, following the familiar pattern. Guards crumpled under the mysteri-

ous drug, as did the workers there, and while they were bemused the Peacebringers took every shell, rifle, machinegun, bomb and lethal weapon in the place and tossed them into the Aegean. Millions of dollars worth of American-made equipment was lost in a few hours.

Before the raging and astonished Greek authorities had time to catch their breath and execute more than a dozen "accomplices"—all of whom had been going unimaginatively about their various business while the raid took place—the scene shifted to the actual battlefield. Whole companies, regiments even, of government troops were overcome by the soporific, and while lying around in unmartial sleep, deprived of their weapons.

While the Athenian police and detachments of the army searched the ruins of the Acropolis for the headquarters of the Peacebringers, great gaps were thus made in the defense wall protecting the kingdom from the incursion of the rebels. Through these gaps disaffected Greeks, Albanians, Macedonians, Bulgars, Jugoslavs and Russians poured. Adam was denounced over a panicky radio and the royal family prepared to move to Crete or even Egypt.

But as the invaders moved triumphantly down the Peloponnesus, they too encountered the eerie power of Adam. Squads, platoons, battalions, found themselves suddenly overcome by irresistible drowsiness—usually in proximity to some innocently gaping peasants—only to awake, disarmed and helpless in enemy territory. But instead of being, as they naturally expected, beset by ferocious government troops brandishing the most improved American weapons, they encountered only bewildered soldiers as helpless and munitionless as them-

selves. The victims, after a period of mutual suspicion, gave up the attempt to prolong the conflict with fists and rocks, fraternized and found common cause in the outrage to their belligerent virility perpetrated by the Peacebringers. By the time the last rifle was broken and the last machinegun destroyed, the former enemies had united in a single implacable cause; to exterminate the foreign meddler who had dared to insult Hellenic manhood.

THE GREEK interlude radically changed the status of Adam—or Isaiah MacAdam as he was now beginning to be called. Exactly how this permanent name evolved is uncertain, though both *Time* and *The Saturday Review of Literature* speculated at length on its origin. Perhaps the natural sensibility of ordinary folk revolted against the conjunction of vowel sounds, instinctively intruding strong consonants between, or a sense of propriety tried to bring the name more into harmony with common usage. Amateur philologists disputed whether the MacAdam had been bestowed because of its association with roads in view of the peacebringers' harping on "the way", or if it did not spring from a notion that his thriftiness with human life was Scottish. At any rate, from a purely American criminal, a sort of glorified gangster with a scientific secret to implement his refusal to harm those at his mercy, he became an international menace.

Nations which had been on the iciest of diplomatic terms began wary conversations regarding common action against Isaiah MacAdam. Nicaragua and Costa Rica, fearing he might choose to hypnotize their raiding parties, agreed on a mutual defense in the event of

his appearance in Central America. India and Pakistan hastily concluded an amicable union, and the Dutch made overtures to the Indonesians for an armistice effective until he was disposed of.

The public opinion polls, which had formerly inquired only, "How would you go about trapping Adam?", now asked, "What do you think of Isaiah MacAdam's methods?" The results were headed, U.S. OVERWHELMINGLY CONDEMNS MACADAM. 89.04% answered "approve", six percent replied "disapprove", while 23.0001% had never heard of him. Lest these figures cause confusion, the analysts showed conclusively that only .00000007% of the citizens—or ten and one half persons—really backed the peacebringers. Publication of this figure brought immediate demand for the arrest of these ten and a fraction who must constitute the entire organization. The only obstacle to this step was the original one—no one could identify the criminals.

Apparently the miscreants themselves were unaffected by the polls, or else the cockiness engendered by the Greek venture made them callous. Now the purpose of the earlier looting of the printshops became apparent as the country was flooded with all sorts of written propaganda. Leaflets, pamphlets and books choked the mails; when the postmaster general threatened to declare MacAdam's matter unmailable he was defied—over the radio—and told any such action would result in complete disruption of all mail service through periodic stupefaction of the postal employees.

So Americans continued to receive not only the Book of Isaiah and copies of *Union Now*, but accounts of the end of the Greek civil

war, tracts on peace, arguments showing what could be done with the money presently spent on armament and copies of Gandhi's Autobiography. After a month of this bombardment, MacAdam made his expected radio broadcast.

"Make an uproar, O ye peoples, and ye shall be broken in pieces; and give ear, all ye of far countries; gird yourselves, and ye shall be broken in pieces. Take counsel together, and it shall come to nought; speak the word, and it shall not stand; for God is with us. This is Adam, or if you prefer, Isaiah MacAdam. The time has come for serious consideration. I have demonstrated fully that I have the power to keep my word, also that I have no personal ambition. I could have made myself dictator of the Balkans, yes, of all Europe if I had wanted. But all I wish is, an end to war, a beating of swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks, so that 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' I know this is what you are looking for too—what do you profit by wars or national sovereignty?

"The United States is the greatest and most powerful country in the world, so it is fitting it should lead the way—be the first to disarm utterly. It is also proper that the seat of the new world government be here, perhaps in Kansas, the geographical center of the continent. On the first of the coming year, then, the present government of the United States will be abolished and delegates from all over the world will meet in Lawrence, Kansas, to form a new authority for the entire globe. By that time the disarming of the country will be complete, you will have begun to enjoy the benefits of peace: lower

taxes, freedom from anxiety, the beginning of the end of obstacles to free trade—so naturally you will be eager to bring these benefits to the rest of the world.

"I urge the present authorities to cooperate with me rather than try the futile job of hindering. On this account I am allowing a week before I begin my work, for Congress and the President voluntarily to disband the armed forces and take steps to supersede the Constitution with a temporary charter for the world. I hope they will see the advisability of doing this freely instead of waiting for me to move first."

Among the many whose fright was turned into panic by this ultimatum was my employer, Joe Ribbon. His answer to the threat of Isaiah MacAdam's rule—for in spite of his disclaimer nearly everyone was convinced he was about to gas the entire population, appropriate their property and make them his slaves—was to close down Ribbon Plastics, including the research department, indefinitely. "What's the use of staying in business? No more military contracts; besides, that fellow can go anywhere, like the invisible man. Maybe he'll come around and inspect my books." Mr. Ribbon had a morbid horror of anyone but himself being intimate with his books; the thought shocked his commercial modesty.

"No," he said emphatically, "Ribbon Plastics closes as of now; we'll reopen when that fellow is dead or in jail where he belongs. Anybody wants his job back in a hurry better get busy and catch Mr. MacAdam."

THAT NIGHT I was sitting in the little two-room apartment on Beverly Boulevard where I had lived for years, drinking cup after

cup of coffee and wondering about the future. It was not just the closing down of the plant which distressed me; I was long since independent of the wage Joe Ribbon paid me. But I had patented several improvements in high explosives and invested the royalties in the companies which manufactured them. If Ribbon Plastics was but the first to close, if MacAdam's mad plans were carried through, what did the future hold for me? My gloomy speculations were interrupted by the doorbell.

Certain it was some explorer who had lost his way looking for Eloise, Jane or Yvette, or perhaps a friendly poker game or a dispenser of marijuana, I went, not too agreeably, to the door.

"Hello, Jeunas. Looking the same as ever; you haven't changed a bit in years."

The hallway was soot black; I was standing in the lighted doorway. Whoever was out there could see me, but I could distinguish nothing more than a looming blur. "Who is it?"

"Such hospitality! Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Oh come in, come in. At least then I can see who you are."

He accepted my grudging invitation and closed the door behind him. It took me almost a full minute to recognize him, he had changed so in the few years since I had seen him last. His face was still commonplace, but impressed on its prosaic planes were deep lines, his hair was shot with gray, and there was a turbulent, impatient look behind the masking glasses.

"Ira!" I exclaimed, "Ira Atz!"

He smiled at me with some of his old-time good humor. "You were expecting maybe Isaiah MacAdam?" he mimicked.

I knew then, and was amazed that I could have been so obtuse all this time. I had had all the clues. I had even, I remembered, thought of my old colleague when I first read the want ad which later proved to be the work of Isaiah MacAdam. But I had never put two and two together till this moment.

"I shouldn't have said that," he remarked, settling himself easily in my one comfortable chair, leaving me only the other which had an unyielding back and seat. "At least not yet. But of course I thought you'd guessed."

"No," I answered stupidly. "No, I never guessed."

"No matter." He cracked his fingers, a new habit. "You know now; that's the important thing. Oh, you can't imagine what it's like to be isolated like this: to walk on the street and know you're passing men and women who would scream with terror if they guessed your identity; yes, and turn you in to the police the next moment. Ishmael, not Isaac nor Isaiah."

He cracked his fingers again and looked around the room carefully. We had never been close friends, our only contact was in the laboratory of Ribbon Plastics. I did not understand what brought him to me.

"To have power," he went on, "absolute power, such as no one ever had before, and realize that imbecile mankind is only afraid you will use it for their good. Can you imagine it? Not that you will destroy them, for that's what they've always approved and admired, rushing to sacrifice their lives for the Hitlers and Stalins and Napoleons and Alexanders. What a joke!"

HE HAD changed, changed vastly. The old Ira was intense, but his intensity had been that of

determination. This nervous man seemed consumed with angry despair. I could hardly believe that the man who had calmly ordered the United States to commit suicide, who was so clearly master of the world, should be in a mood of furious protest against injustice. What more could he want?

"You didn't exactly have to—" I began.

"Of course I had to! What choice had I? To sit around waiting for the statesmen to finish the work thus far so nobly advanced of making the planet uninhabitable."

"But, Ira, you're a wood chemist and a good one. Why couldn't you stick to your own work?"

"I did, I have, I am. Is science a device for making Joe Ribbon more money? Or is it something to make men live better, longer, more happily? Am I to cultivate "pure" science on the island of Bikini? Or in a world Bikini? Surely you must have realized by this time that the world is as much a part of our laboratory as the tables and retorts under our hands? And that you cannot do your work in a laboratory threatened by immediate danger, with the walls cracking and the ceiling about to fall in?"

The same old Ira after all, I thought; spouting, dreaming, impractical—I pulled my thoughts up. Not entirely impractical.

"More than anything else," he said, "I've missed having someone like you around I could talk shop to, someone who'd appreciate that paxide is not the end product, but merely a trivial byproduct of lignin—"

"Paxide? Is that what you call your sleeping gas?"

"Gas? Oh come, surely you weren't taken in by these Sunday supplement analysts? Paxide isn't a

gas. It's a liquid."

"A liquid! Then gas masks..."

"Not a bit of use in the world. Paxide is absorbed through the pores as well as the mouth or nose. The only thing effective against it is an antidote already present in the body. And like all the lignin derivatives it is many times as efficient as the coal tar products. Paxide is spectacular, but when it has done its work it will have only a limited use as a general anesthetic because it is simply a superior aspirin. But lignon—forty times as strong as nylon..."

He went on and on, extolling the wonders of lignin, just as he used to when he was working for Joe Ribbon. Only then it had been conjecture; now it was knowledge. That, I thought, is why I never recognized his voice in the broadcasts; that is the great mark of the change in him. The voice was still commonplace and flat—it would always be that—but it had deepened, become more incisive, more assured.

He was telling me now of his life after he was fired from Ribbon Plastics. Improvident, impractical, without a dime, he determined nevertheless to devote himself exclusively to his lignin research. He borrowed, begged, stole even, to keep going; was hungry and dirty most of the time. He solved problem after problem, living and working in an abandoned garage, developing products industrialists would have paid millions for, but which he would not sell in what he called "an uncivilized and childish world". Paxide was the last byproduct, in his opinion an unimportant one, but he recognized instantly that it was the one which would enable him to use the others properly. And what he meant by that phrase was to give them away freely, once he

had united and pacified the world. He broke off abruptly. "Of course you're with us?"

"With you?" Suddenly the man in front of me was no longer good old Ira Atz, but Isaiah MacAdam, the world menace. What happened when a confessed gangster asked you casually if you were with him—and you said no? "I...I don't know..."

"You don't know? Good God, man—where have you been all this time? Thanks to paxide the human race faces the prospect of peace and sufficiency for the first time in its existence. How can you not know whether you're with us or not?"

"I don't question your aims, Ira," I temporized, "but your methods—"

"—are illegal? What an old stickler you are! They may be illegal now, but the world government will make them legal all right. It'll have to, to justify its birth."

"I wasn't thinking entirely of legality. I keep remembering the businesses that have failed because of you—"

"Name one. I never exploited small firms; none of the banks that contributed went broke."

"Perhaps not, but there were certainly drastic changes after some of your...exploitations, and many employees were fired."

"I sent them money. We traced them down and saw that they didn't suffer."

"It was other people's money."

"Whose isn't? Don't tell me Joe Ribbon made his the hard way."

"Ribbon closed up, you know—on your account. I'm out of a job."

"You can name your own salary when you come in with us."

"And there were the Greeks shot after the raid at Pireaus."

"Yes. Vile and stupid. And I blame myself for not taking pre-

cautions. But what about the lives saved by the ending of the war? Doesn't that balance?"

"Not for the executed and their families."

"Then you won't come in?"

I HAD NO intention of being forced either to refuse or accept. The man was a fanatic and there was no telling to what lengths he might go if crossed. "I can't imagine what you need me for. You must have chemists, and better ones, in plenty."

"Of course we have; scientists from every field, cellulose experts too. It isn't a matter of need at all. I just want somebody around who knows Ira Atz the man, and not Isaiah MacAdam, the conquering genius."

I continued to roll with his punches, desperate to avoid committing myself one way or the other. Naturally I had no intention of throwing my lot with his, but I dared not let him know it. "How can I get in touch with you?" I asked finally.

"I'll get in touch with you. No one knows where I am to be found; no one can be put to the temptation to betray me."

After he left, I puzzled my problem for a long time, solacing myself with fresh coffee. Nothing but an antidote already in the body. "A superior aspirin," he had said. Absently I poured another cup. Nothing but an antidote—

"Coffee!" I shouted aloud. "Coffee!"

It was three o'clock. I put down the cup that had done its revelatory work; my mind was made up. I didn't stop to pack a bag, change my clothes, or telephone anyone. I walked over to the taxi stand at First and Vermont and woke a

hackie. "Municipal Airport," I said.

I have little recollection of the trip to Washington. I'm sure I was too excited to sleep, too intense to strike up conversations. And I have only a vague memory of the delays and annoyances before I got through the barriers of officialdom to the head of the FBI. In spite of the times I'd already told my story, the cross-examinations I had wearily submitted to, and the consequent opportunities I later learned had certainly been used to verify my bonafides, I had once more to repeat myself.

"But how do you know this Ira Atz is really Isaiah MacAdam? There are all sorts of unbalanced characters eager for notoriety; men and women who will do anything, confess any crime, to get into the headlines. How do you know your friend Ignatz—"

"Ira."

"—isn't lying?"

"Because his story checks. With his history as a nut on the subject of one world as well as a wood chemist. And even if it didn't, wouldn't it be worth following up? Or don't you really want to stop Isaiah MacAdam?"

He leaned back in his chair and looked at me thoughtfully across the desk. "To be frank, there are many of us—even here in the Federal Bureau of Investigation—who don't. Idealists who have been taken in by MacAdam and are prepared to help him, at least by inaction, if not overtly as Peacebringers."

"In that case—" I began.

"But I am not one of them. Like yourself, my interests are...patriotic."

"Then if you catch Ira and put him behind bars—"

"Suppose we do. I don't think it would be easy, but suppose we do.

Remember what happened when they caught one of his men once, Bill Jones—"

"Jack Smith, I think."

"An alias, probably. Well, if we got MacAdam, first thing some of his gang would be around with this gas—"

"Liquid. Paxide is a derivative of lignin."

"—and before you could say 'peace on earth, good will to men', they'd have him out again."

"Not if his guards are inoculated with an antidote beforehand."

"You'll excuse my scepticism, but I have no proof your antidote will work."

"Damn it, man!" I cried in exasperation, "I've had no time to conduct tests and no samples of paxide available if I had. But surely it's worth taking a chance."

IT WAS impossible to understand the apathy and inertia pervading Washington, and indeed, the whole country during that week of grace given by Isaiah MacAdam. All seemed resigned to—or was it possible, anxious for?—the threatened ruin of cherished institutions. I cannot even say my report and suggestions met with polite indifference. Indifference, yes; politeness, no.

I stayed on however, much as I begrudged the terrific expense of the capital and raged against the blank wall of imbecility. I don't think I hoped any longer to convince anyone in authority or to reach the ear of an official not bogged down in stupor. I stayed because there was nothing else to do.

The balance of the week passed. Then it was Sunday.

I want to make it clear that no one expected a miracle, such as a change of heart on the part of MacAdam, or the sudden intervention of

Superman. Everyone knew he would keep his word and begin the destruction of American defenses as soon as the time limit expired. Most people agreed his first blow would be against one of the atom-bomb plants.

Evidently his mania demanded a more spectacular gesture: he chose to begin with the navy. Shortly after 3 A.M.—midnight in California—shore sentries fell into the typical paxide coma, launches were seized, and the great fleets boarded. The destroyers in San Diego, battleships and cruisers off San Pedro or San Francisco Bay, the Atlantic Fleet lined up like sitting ducks in the Hudson, were all taken over by the Peacebringers. Their numbers must have been ridiculously underestimated by the newspapers, to say nothing of their discipline, for they not only took over all except the few vessels at Pearl Harbor—confederates even boarded ships on goodwill missions in European ports—but the shore installations of the searchlights, radar and communications as well. The night watches were anesthetized by paxide before they could challenge the invaders from the seized launches, and the sleeping crews sprayed with the same soporific.

Most of the sailors were on shore-leave; even so it must have been a terrific task to bundle the unconscious seamen into the launches, make many trips to the docks and back, piling up helpless navy personnel like cords of wood, and then finally opening the seacocks on the magnificent vessels and decamping before dawn.

Daylight—and the astonished, awakening sailors, incredulous on the docks and wharves where they had been dumped, saw only empty water where the proud navy had

vanished. But not vanished entirely, for in the shallower anchorages, when the ships had not listed too far, the tops of the tripod masts still showed steadfastly above the waves. Isaiah MacAdam had demonstrated his power and his hatred of the weapons of war beyond any doubt.

Early in the morning, while the telegrapher at Zwingle, Iowa, was under the spell of paxide, a telegram addressed simply "To the American People" was sent out from his key. "I have not spoken in secret."

I WAS SITTING in my tiny hotel-room, alternately cursing the pig-headedness of the authorities who could have easily prevented this disaster had they listened to me, and wondering if it was not yet too late to accept Ira's offer after all, when the phone rang. It was the head of the FBI.

"Can you come immediately?"

"Yes," I answered bitterly, "now that the horse is stolen."

"Never mind that. There will be a car at your hotel door by the time you get downstairs. Wait for nothing. This is urgent."

Exactly what I'd been telling him for a week.

We raced through the silent, empty length of Constitution Avenue, siren wide open. I don't know whether I had expected mourning crowds, or curious crowds, riotous or angry crowds, but I know I must have expected crowds of some kind to demonstrate their shock and awareness, for this Sunday calm scandalized me. Apathy in the face of MacAdam's threat was bad enough; indifference to his deed was simply unbelievable.

The Chief was waiting for me in the doorway of his office. He wasted no time on preliminaries. "How long will it take to prepare 100,000

doses of antidote?"

"How many assistants can I have?"

"All you want—the entire medical and public health service—and as many laboratories as you need."

"Two days. But what about picking up Ira Atz?"

"Can't find him. Been trying since the first day you suggested. No, we're going to have to do it the hard way."

For the next forty-eight hours I worked like a maniac, but at the end of that time, thanks to the simplicity of the formula we had not 100,000 dosages, but three times as many. They were instantly flown to all vital army posts, airbases, munitions depots and atom plants. No one could know where Isaiah MacAdam would strike next.

But though no one could know, speculation and panic reached unprecedented heights, and the convulsions of a nation with a dreadful wound was a horrible sight. Hardly a store or factory opened on Monday morning; the banks and stock market remained closed; great mobs, recovering from their impassiveness of the day before, paraded through the streets, looting, burning, destroying. The churches were open; in some, prayers were offered for the confusion of this enemy, in others Isaiah MacAdam was proclaimed savior of the world. For the first time there were open mass meetings of Peacebringers, and hundreds of thousands of deluded men and women testified their devotion.

The rest of the world experienced the same fright and perturbation in only slightly less degree. MacAdam had kept his promise of action; after the United States was completely disarmed it would be their turn. Nothing, it seemed, could stop him from fulfilling his dream of one

world, helpless against his imposed unification.

ON TUESDAY he moved again, and again, despite all calculations, it was at an unanticipated point. Instead of striking at a military installation with characteristic brazenness he attacked the very heart of the government—the Capitol itself—with Congress in session and the president in his room there waiting to address them.

Almost at the stroke of noon, well-dressed strangers approached the military police stationed around the building. Asked some trivial question, the guards suddenly became aware of a vapor in the air like very fine rain although it was a cloudless day and realized that the strangers were now holding small vessels in their hands from which protruded nozzles like those of an atomizer spray. Also, the strangers were looking surprised and disconcerted.

Not more than two or three of the MP's grasped the situation, but these few acted instantly. As a routine order, the guards, like everyone on sentry duty, had been immunized with injections of caffeine that morning; MacAdam's sleep-inducing liquid affected them no more than drops of tapwater.

Shouting a warning, the MPs lowered their rifles to the ready. There was no struggle; the disguised Peacebringers, unable to conquer their dismay at the first failure of the hitherto invincible paxide, continued futilely to spray the air. Dozens of bystanders collapsed into sleep before the astonished attackers were arrested, bayoneted, or shot.

Among the captured was Ira Atz himself, evidently unable to resist being present at what was to have

been his greatest triumph. He seemed dazed and sullen when I was rushed over to identify him. He refused to talk; indeed, he had so far changed from his old self that he spat in my face, thus showing himself, I thought, a poor loser. They hustled him off before a lynch mob could form; he was tried shortly after and sentenced to so many consecutive terms that it would require many many lifetimes for him ever to be free again.

And that, except for one little incident, ends my part in the story of Isaiah MacAdam. Joe Ribbon promptly reopened his plastics factory. The armament industry boomed as never before, what with a whole navy to replace. The FBI finally found Ira's laboratory with its wealth of lignin derivatives, products which have made fortunes for the forward-looking companies now manufacturing them, particularly those almost magic materials which were made into uniforms, heavy duty tires for army vehicles, and casings for atom bombs.

As a precaution against any of

the Peacebringers still at large repeating their leader's scheme the world now takes daily injections of caffeine, that simple antidote suggested to me by my fondness for coffee; and if this has led to an increased mortality from heart conditions, it is a small price to pay for our freedom to prepare to defend ourselves from whatever malcontent nations may be getting ready to attack us.

Oh yes, my last appearance in the drama. I suppose I keep forgetting it because of a slightly unpleasant blunder. I was awarded a special medal by Congress for my part in capturing Isaiah MacAdam, and presented with \$30,000 from a grateful nation. The President announced the award in a nationwide radio address. It was a very proud moment.

Only he kept making one slip. My name, as you know, is the good old Huguenot one of Jeunas. All through the fulsome talk, the chief executive kept substituting a d for the n.

THE END

SMOOTHIE

By Ramsey Sinclair

NIGHT AND day the research labs pound away. From the frozen Siberian wastes to the roasting New Mexican deserts, the hunt for bigger and better guided missiles goes on. And everything about them, from the radar associated with them to the rocket engines, is being improved step by step. We can't look behind the iron curtain, but we do know what we're aiming for.

And one of the important things is the control device for remotely controlled rockets. This gadget of course is a variation on the automatic pilot and it used a gyroscope. Now gyros are not new. They've been built into ships and planes everywhere. And they work like a charm.

But they have faults. For one thing, friction is a curse in a gyroscope for it introduces minute errors which cause the

instrument to go off course slightly. This isn't of much importance in a slow-moving ship or airplane, but in a three or four or ten thousand mile an hour rocket, it's a tragedy! They've started to lick it, though.

The system is simple. It involves making perfect bearings. The bearings must be polished smoother than the surface of an optical mirror. Like the telescope mirrors of the astronomer, these bearings are planed smooth by tiny little particles of rouge. Not even an atom or two must be allowed to project above the surface of the bearing. The result is that the gyros intended for guided missiles are near-perfect creations for their brief span of life—a matter of minutes. But in those minutes the rocket can deliver its load of death and destruction.



The two Venusians threw Laura's struggling figure over the edge of the brimming inferno . . .

TWO AGAINST VENUS

By Craig Browning

**It seemed the only way to get at the
secret of this planet's superstitions was
to let its natives turn you into stone . . .**

CARL STEVENS sat precariously with his feet on the desk, the chair resting on two legs. His hands were cupped at the nape of his neck. His lazily serene blond head was one to bring out the desire to possess in women.

The older man across the desk, although resembling Carl in most physical respects, had none of his calm.

"Men are too scarce here, Carl," he said. "You've got to pitch in. We—I need you here. The natives are getting uneasy. Unless we keep them in hand they'll desert—and that would mean ruin to me. My whole fortune is tied up in this contract to put a tunnel through the Corscatch Ridge."

"But, Dad," Carl objected mildly. "I'm not an engineer. I know a little of the Venusian lingo—enough to get along with a co-operative native; but frankly, I haven't the least idea how to meet the problems of this job of yours. I'd be a handicap."

"You'll learn fast enough," John Stevens said confidently. "And anyway, the natives know all that is needed about the technical aspects and running the machines. That isn't what you're needed for."

"Then what *am* I needed for?"

"Morale," John said. "You must have read how the natives' lives are governed by superstition and their peculiar religion."

"Yes, of course," Carl murmured disinterestedly. "But what has that to do with cutting this tunnel? It's just a job."

"It's more than that," John Stevens said slowly. "This Corscatch Ridge is a sort of natural wall dividing the domains of the god of the hot side and the god of the inhabitable continents."

"Say, that's right!" Surprise made Carl drop his feet to the floor. "Maybe you do need me, Dad. I sort of hate to give up my vacation, though. I'd wanted to sort of explore so that I would have material for my Doctor's. How far is there left to go?"

"Not more than fifty feet," John replied. "But when that's done there's still the building to put up; and the temperature out there is around two hundred. Even the natives will have to wear refrigerated suits—if they stay and work."

"If," Carl echoed. "O.K., Dad. I'll stay."

"Thanks, boy," his father said

gruffly. There was a silence. The older man broke it on a ruminative note. "I wonder sometimes about these natives of Venus. Science says they can't possibly be an offshoot of the human race—something about convergent evolution. They cite examples of convergent evolution back on Earth—two completely unrelated species having very nearly the same appearance. They say that's what humans and Venusians are. The few offspring of mixed parentage have never been able to reproduce, you know. Even though they have been able to grow up into normal people who look quite a bit like a white Venusian with lots of purple birthmarks."

"Everybody wonders about it," Carl said, taking out a cigarette. "It's pretty conclusive though that it is convergent evolution, and that there has never before been any contact between Earth and Venus. I've read a couple of pretty good books on the subject, showing details of structure of the two species, man and Venusian. Similarity of shape is about all they have in common. If the Venusian nose had a bridge in it instead of looking like the nose of an ape, their shape would be identical with ours—though of course they are an average of a foot and a half taller than we are. But their indigo colored skin is different under the microscope, and they have never had any hair. One book argues that since the two skins are different the Venusian and human brains are different in some way, since the brain develops in the embryo from skin on the back."

"I doubt that about the brains being different," John said. "They're more like us in the way they think than some Earth races."

The phone on the desk jingled. John Stevens scooped up the re-

ceiver. His attitude changed abruptly at what he heard.

"Come on, Carl," he said, rising and going to the door. "The tunnel's through. It was less than we figured."

HE SPOKE over his shoulder as they hurried along the corridor to the main shaft.

"Fortunately we sealed off the bore about a hundred feet back from operations," he said. "That way we were prepared for any unexpected break through. That was Laura on the phone. It's her shift at operations."

"A woman?" Carl exclaimed.

"A girl," John corrected. He chuckled. "Mighty nice girl, too. I was going to let you meet her as a last resort to convince you to stay and help me out. She's my secretary, and volunteered to help out by taking one shift every other day with the natives. They work harder for her than for any of the men, too."

The thunderous screech and rattle of ore cars drowned out voices. Carl and his father climbed into one of the slow moving cars and hung on. Ten minutes later the string of cars stopped against the dead end of a huge circular wall that looked vaguely like the circular door to a bank vault.

There was a platform here on either side of the tracks, its floor even with the tops of the cars. Neatly ordered lockers, piles of equipment, and two almost naked seven-foot Venusians were on the platform.

The two Venusians evidently didn't know yet of the break through. They welcomed "Boss man" and "Boss boy" with wide grins that disclosed perfectly formed white teeth. Their skins were a richly glistening indigo filmed with moisture.

"I'll see if I can get Laura on the

phone," John said. He went to the phone nailed to a vertical plank against the bare granite side of the tunnel. His conversation consisted of yes, and a couple of O.K.s.

"Laura says the atmospheric pressure is sixteen point eight," he said after he hung up. "That's nearly two pounds less than on this side. That's about what we figured. Lucky we did or we wouldn't have put up a double partition for a lock."

"What makes the difference?" Carl asked.

"The wind," John explained. "It blows toward the hot side. At the top of the Ridge the wind velocity is about seventy miles an hour. Down at this level on the leeward side that makes a vacuum."

"I see," Carl said.

"Put on a suit," John ordered, reaching for one of those hanging along the wall at the end of the row of lockers.

They were, Carl saw, very much like the standard space suit on all interplanetary liners, except for the bulging refrigerating pack on the back—more bulky than the standard heat pack of a space suit.

The natives helped them into the suits, screwing in the transparent helmets with smooth twists of glistening dark hands whose backs were deep indigo and whose palms were a lighter shade that blended into pale blue.

Almost at once it was comfortably cool. Carl sighed with relief at the unexpected comfort.

He followed his father to a door in the barrier, discovering as he walked that the suit seemed to weigh almost nothing. It was constructed so that its rigid frame took most of the weight away from the body.

Carl followed his father through the door, a sealing hatch-cover affair. There was another similar barrier

fifty feet farther on. When they reached it John Stevens opened a large valve. There was a sucking hiss that died swiftly. Then that door was open and they were inside.

HERE an almost impenetrable fog filled the bore, with rivulets of steam trickling down the crystalline surface of the walls. Lights were faint foci of incandescence here and there, and obscured gray figures moved about.

One approached as they stood in indecision.

"Am I glad you're here," a feminine voice said with relief. "They've been determined to quit work and get out. If they do that they'll take every one of the natives with them."

"Laura," John said. "This is my son, Carl."

Carl looked curiously at the girl under the spherical glass helmet. Laura returned his gaze with one equally frank. John Stevens left them and went over to the group of natives who were standing near the place where the steam seemed to be entering.

"I never expected to find a girl up here when I decided to pay Dad a visit before seeing the rest of Venus," Carl said. He held out his hand and smiled.

Laura took it. They both looked down, startled, as they suddenly realized their hands were encased in insulated gloves that were an integral part of their suits.

"What does it look like outside?" Carl asked.

"Come and take a look," Laura said. He followed her to the break.

The break was a jagged opening. One of the rock borers had tumbled half way through it and was lying on its side. Rocks had fallen, partly covering it, but making the opening larger so that it was possible to climb

over the machine and out into the open.

The scene that met their eyes as they emerged was one of cosmic fury unleashed—and alien. At their feet bare rock, sterile and washed by eternally condensing and evaporating steam, dropped swiftly to disappear into a seething wall of boiling vapors.

Above, where the relatively cool winds from the other side of the Ridge whipped over, clouds came and vanished with unbelievable speed.

As they watched, it seemed they were the focus of a concerted attack by white, billowing enemies that some strange force was driving back at times, and at others weakening to allow sudden surges that threatened to succeed in engulfing them.

There was no color—only whites and grays and the lifeless washed rocks. And the heat. It radiated through their helmets and made itself felt against their faces in spite of the refrigeration inside.

Carl discovered Laura drawing closer to him.

"Do you realize this is something no human being has seen before?" he heard her say, subdued.

"All this work of driving through a tunnel to look at this wall of steam!" Carl answered. "What good will it do?"

"I don't know," Laura said. "Maybe none; but it will at least give us a point of observation of weather phenomena at the edge of the sun side of Venus—with a hasty retreat to the safety of the other side of the Ridge."

"Wait!" Carl said suddenly, pointing. "What's that?"

TWO HUNDRED yards down the slope was something darker than the surrounding rock.

"I thought I saw it move," he said. "Let's go down and see what it is."

"No," the girl said. "Wait. Those rocks may be treacherous. It can't be anything alive, anyway, in this heat."

"It moved again," Carl said excitedly. "And it's the color of a native. You know the standard for priests these natives set. A priest gains his rank by visiting the sunward side and bringing back proof he's been there. Maybe this is one that ventured too far over and couldn't make it back."

"We'll have to risk the danger then," Laura said. "If he's still alive there may be a chance to save him. Let's go."

"Take my hand," he said.

They made their way down slowly, stepping from one loose rock to another, stumbling and picking themselves up again and going on. Long before they reached him they knew it was a Venusian.

It was impossible for him to be alive in the near boiling point heat, yet he was, feebly crawling over the blistering rocks, upward toward the Ridge on whose other side lay the coolness of life.

They reached him and dropped down beside him, trying to pick him up. He seemed not to feel their touch, but kept crawling as if his muscles were working after his cooked brain was unable to tell them to desist.

"Great priest of the Sun God," Laura said in the Venusian language.

The great body jerked as at an electric shock. The hairless head paused, then slowly lifted. Sightless eyes peered at them—sightless and cooked-white. Eyes twice as large as a human's, protruding from indigo sockets in a grotesquery of sculpture.

For a breathless minute Carl and

Laura stared at those sightless orbs. Then, slowly, the Venusian toppled over on his side, cooked skin scraping loose as he settled in death.

It was only then that they noticed the bag hung around his neck by a native hemp cord. A bag of the native priest-cloth. The orange colored bag was large as a woman's handbag. It contained some object that was heavy as Carl tentatively lifted the bag.

"He's dead," Carl said. "Let's take this bag and try to hide him with a few rocks—at least so he can't be seen from the tunnel."

He took the bag from around the dead neck and handed it to Laura, then hastily built a low wall of rocks to hide the body.

"Let's go," he finally said, straightening up. He took the bag from Laura. "Probably nothing in it but some rocks," he muttered. "But we might as well take it along and look into it when we get back to the office."

WHEN THEY climbed back over the borer into the tunnel they heard the voice of John Stevens and the excited, deep voiced mumbling of several natives talking at once. This kept on until they had stepped into full view in the tunnel.

Suddenly one of the natives let out a shout and pointed at the orange bag in Carl's hand. At once the natives became silent. Too late Carl realized they would recognize what the bag meant.

The silence grew intense, then abruptly changed into a thunder of voices. Carl understood what they were saying.

"No!" he shouted, holding the bag behind him. "Great Sun Priest gave it to me, his white brother. He is dead now. His word is a command."

The thunder settled into low

mutter. The natives were debating among themselves whether to go out and look. Three of them reluctantly separated from the others and went to the break, vanishing outside.

"Let's go to the office and find out what's in here," Carl said softly. Laura nodded.

"Go ahead, you two," John Stevens said. "The next shift will be here in a few minutes. I'll stay until they come. Somebody'd better remain here with these natives."

Carl and Laura turned to leave. One of the natives came up to them and bowed, speaking hesitantly in the native language.

"If you please," he said. "We can tell you what is in the bag, if you but care to listen."

"And what is in the bag?" Laura asked, smiling.

The native turned and glanced at his fellows, who nodded their consent for him to speak.

"It is the living stone," he said. "It will look to you as other stones, yet it can be shown that these stones live and have life and are not as other stones, just as the living creature is not as the dead creature."

"Would you come with us, man-of-wisdom, to explain more?" Carl asked slowly, hesitating over the Venusian words.

Once more the Venusian turned to his fellows, who gave their consent.

As the three left the blocked off head of the tunnel and rode the ore cars back to the office Carl was carefully concealing his inner excitement.

He had read of the stories of Venusian gods of living stone, able to step out of the stone and assume flesh, and who, whether in stone or in flesh, were the real rulers of Venus.

The native had said it could be shown that these stones lived. If that were so in any sense of the word, then he had his fingers on something worth presentation for his doctor's thesis.

His thoughts turned to the dead Venusian who had been carrying the bag. He must have picked up the stones—if stones they turned out to be—not far from where he had been found. He certainly couldn't have traveled far over rocks hot enough to cook flesh. So if it turned out that there was anything unusual about the contents of the orange bag, it should be simple to find the spot where it came from, and get more.

Carl felt of the objects in the bag as the cars jogged along. They were hard like rocks. There seemed to be two of them, one smaller than the other.

They reached John Stevens' office. The native held out his hand for the bag. Carl hesitated, then gave it to him. The native made a rapid motion in the air with his fingers as if going through some religious routine, and opened the bag.

His hand reached in and drew out one of the objects, handing it to Carl.

It was undoubtedly stone. It was a soft pink in color, a pink that seemed to shine through a white surface from inside.

CHAPTER II

CLYDE MASTERS sat at his desk scanning the reports that had been turned in by his various operatives. As chief of the trouble-shooting department of Venus-American he was more important than the President of the United States, and almost as important as the least of the vice-presidents of V-A. That was understandable when you con-

sidered that the capital stock of V-A was worth more than three times as much as the United States, and better than seventy-five percent of the Government's income came from taxes on V-A and dividends on V-A stock owned by the Government.

Clyde was fully aware of his relative importance in the scheme of things; but he was equally aware of the precariousness of his position. One major blunder and he could conceivably be through. Done. Washed up.

Since he never wanted this to happen he spent long hours each day studying the reports of his operatives, who in turn spent long hours each day gathering the material for the reports.

He wouldn't have thought of himself as a superman, but he knew all his operatives personally—and there were over two thousand of them. He wouldn't have thought of himself as a financial wizard, but one of his many responsibilities was to see that the par value of V-A stock and the market value stayed about the same.

He had a habit of never overlooking any bets. He had a habit of estimating the potentialities of unimportant details. Sometimes an insignificant little thing would send him tearing off to Venus—and almost invariably that insignificant little detail would become a very big thing by the time he got there.

The report he was reading at the moment said, "Carl Stevens, son of contractor on Corscatch Ridge bore reports finding two strange stones in bag about neck of native found dead on hot side of Ridge. He further reports that a native claimed the two stones to be 'alive'."

Clyde Masters, his frowning eyes re-reading the report, reached out and picked up the telephone.

"Put me through to Venus, honey," he spoke into the receiver. "And while I'm on get me reservations on the next ship."

He hung up and continued reading reports. Venus was nearly behind the Sun. In a geodesic trajectory, spaced about two million miles apart, were the V-A space ships going to Venus—and from Venus back to Earth, as regular in their schedules as passenger trains between any two large cities in the United States. His telephone call would be relayed on tight beam along this string of ships, stepped up through each relay station, so that, aside from the ten minute interval of time between planets that made conversation a long drawn out affair, the call would be as clear and undistorted as a local call.

In twenty minutes the phone rang. He picked it up. It was the Venus operator.

"Your party is being rung," she said. "You may begin your message. If he does not answer by the time it arrives we will record it for him."

"This is Clyde Masters. I'm coming to Venus on the next ship to leave here. When I get there I want Carl Stevens and those two stones, the native who claims they're alive, and all others connected with their discovery. Have them ready for me. I don't want any time wasted when I get there. Also, have all Venus reports sent both to my ship and to my office here. That's all."

He dropped the receiver back on the hook and continued reading reports. The efficient switchboard operator took care of the routine task of calling Clyde's houseboy and telling him to have things packed and at the spaceport, making sure the reservation for passage went through smoothly, and sending out the inter-

office memo announcing that Clyde Masters was leaving for Venus.

THIRTY-SIX hours later, as the ship he was on neared the Moon's orbit, Clyde received the first report in response to his orders. It read:

"Instructions received. Stones in our possession. Wish permission to turn them over to Research for tests. Carl Stevens and Laura Wilde agree to be on hand. Native who made statement about rocks cannot be found."

It was signed Fred Nelson, O.Q.C..

Clyde thought it over and sent an O.K. for the stones to be turned over to Research. Forty-eight hours later a second report came.

"Stones exhibit remarkable properties very similar to life. One stone left intact, other used for tests, and broken into small working specimens. On standard tests the specific heat of material seems to be infinite, and its temperature stays at 100.03 degrees. Sample weighing five grams absorbed two hundred thousand calories without change of temperature. Second specimen weighing three grams gave off five hundred thousand calories in refrigerated medium of temperature minus twenty degrees F. in ten hour period, then suddenly dropped its internal temperature and became ordinary matter, with specific heat of 17.32 and chemical structure similar to quartz. More elaborate tests being devised on basis of unusual properties."

Clyde read the report a second time. Then he went to the ship's library and searched through one of the several books on Venus and its inhabitants. At last he found what he was looking for: "The normal body temperature of a Venusian native is slightly higher than that of an Earthling, being 100.03, approximately one and four tenths degrees

higher than for humans."

He whistled in amazement. Was it coincidence that the mysteriously constant temperature of the "living" stone was exactly the same as the normal body temperature of a Venusian?

He thought over the idea of suggesting a few further tests, then decided against it. After all, Research had some of the System's best scientists. They would not only think of everything he could, but also probably find or point out what was wrong with his suggestions if they were haywire.

So, instead, he hunted up the ship's captain, George Walters, an old friend of his, and talked over the mystery of the living stone with him.

"I think I have a possible explanation," Captain Walters said thoughtfully. "That native called it 'living' stone. We all know that Venusian has many subtle twists to its meanings that we can't understand. In this case maybe he merely meant that it was a stone that kept the priest alive while in the hot zone."

"But how could it keep him alive?" Clyde asked.

"Well," George Walters said. "Suppose you strapped two flat pieces of this stuff to the bottoms of your feet. Where it came in contact with your skin it would maintain the temperature of your skin at the Venusian normal of 100.03 degrees, no matter how hot or cold the stuff you were walking on. If it can keep its properties when ground up into a powder, it could be made into a paste and painted over the skin, and keep the skin a normal temperature regardless of how hot the atmosphere. So a native could travel in the hot zone with perfect immunity simply by wearing stone sandals and painting himself with a paste made of the stuff."

"I see," Clyde Masters said softly, surprised at the thought. "Then the stone itself is not 'alive' in any sense, but merely has some new physical property. I wonder how it can store up such vast quantities of heat? There's possibilities there."

"Possibilities, yes," George Walters said dryly. "But maybe we'll never find out what they are. My guess is that the natives'll never tell us how to turn ordinary stone into this new stuff. Their educated class, the priests, consider us a bunch of fools who are on the wrong track in our science."

"Yes, I know," Clyde said. "They say we missed the boat when we accepted an external world outside the mind. I find myself studying what they mean by that every once in a while." He chuckled dryly.

"I just thought of something else," George said. "The stones tie in with the stories about a secret temple where there are four statues of living stone, shaped in the images of the four gods of Venus."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?" Clyde said. "But that story claims that those four gods actually live in their stone counterparts, and sometimes step out and become flesh-and-blood Venusians. But on that basis the native really meant the stones were living—alive."

"Perhaps he did," George agreed. "But that wouldn't affect my theory of the use the stone is put to in going into the hot side of the planet. You know, it would be very enlightening to find out how high a temperature the stone can withstand."

"Maybe the next report will give us that information," Clyde said. "That is their next obvious line of study, now that they know it can stand only so much cold before it loses its stable-temperature property and 'dies.'"

AND in a small room in one wing of the sprawling Research building of V-A that was exactly what they were doing. A ten gram piece of the rock was inside a complex furnace setup, and the various instruments connected to the parts of the setup were clicking off the calories of heat being absorbed by it. The figure was already fabulous.

"Where does all that heat go?" Dr. Evard Smith asked in amazement as he read off the figures.

"We'll have one possible answer shortly," Dr. Jimmy Hope said. "If the heat energy is being transformed into mass we'll be able to detect an increase in mass of the specimen according to the equation, E equals Mc^2 . According to our figures the specimen should weigh half a gram more than when we started, when we take it out two hours from now. If it doesn't, then we've at least proven that the energy absorbed is not transformed into mass."

"If it isn't transformed into mass, then what?" Dr. Smith asked.

"Well," Dr. Hope said, shrugging his shoulders. "In that case we have two possible explanations. One, it may be transformed into some type of radiation that is departing from the specimen at light speed—some frequency that we may be able to detect. The other, that we at last have an entering wedge into something long suspected, but never detected; hyperspace channels of energy."

"Hyperspace?" Dr. Smith echoed incredulously.

"Maybe not the hyperspace of mathematics," Dr. Hope said. "But there's been a lot of study that led to the belief that life was in some way different than ordinary matter. The experiments performed on insects by several scientists back in the middle twentieth century disclosed energy appearing that couldn't be accounted

for by ordinary laws of chemistry and physics. They were, remarkably, very similar to the results we're getting on these stones. And that specimen that 'died' did so in a way perfectly analogous to living matter.

"Even if this specimen has gained enough mass to account for the energy absorbed, we still have to find out in what way it was accomplished. And regardless of how it took place, we have the distinctly new phenomenon of energy of motion being changed directly into mass."

"What's happening now?" Evard Smith asked. The meter showing absorption rate was clicking off zeros. Dr. Hope studied it uneasily. The dial showing the temperature of the stone showed it to be still at 100.03.

"Evidently it's stopped absorbing heat," he said. "I don't like that. I think I'd better take it out of the furnace now, before something happens."

Suiting his actions to his words, he pulled the switch that would shut off the furnace. It was his last act before the wave of searing, explosive force swept through him, leaving nothing but a tottering mass of carbon and calcium.

The blast wrecked the whole wing of the Research building and left the rest of the structure dangerously cracked.

CLYDE MASTERS re-read the report from Fred Nelson, O.I.C.. It read, "Explosion wrecked wing of Research building where experiments on rocks were taking place. Everything destroyed except rocks themselves, which were found intact. Experts state that explosion was similar to atomic kind, but with no evidence of radiations or radio-activity present. Seven men killed, including Dr. Hope. No clue as to type of experiment that caused explosion."

He hunted up George Walters, the captain, and showed the report to him.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded.

Captain Walters studied the report. "What's your own opinion, Clyde?"

"I don't know what to think," Clyde Masters said, frowning. "Considering that Hope was almost certainly trying to 'kill' a sample of the rock with heat, it seems likely that he raised it to a critical temperature where it exploded."

"That might be the case," George Walters said thoughtfully. "But there's another possibility. Suppose instead of raising a specimen to a higher and higher temperature, he was pouring heat energy into it at some constant high temperature. Considering that he probably switched to high temperatures at least twenty-four hours ago, that seems the more probable."

"You mean there might be some critical energy-density at which the stuff explodes?" Clyde asked. "Yes, that's more likely to be it—or a combination of the two, temperature and energy absorbed. A breakdown, releasing all the stored energy like a condenser will release its charge by arcing when a certain electrical potential is reached that will force an arc to a ground. Too bad no record of what he was doing is left. We know now that the stuff can be dangerous, though. Can't you speed up this tub a little and get there sooner?"

"Can't be done," Captain Walters said. "We're still a little over ten days away from Venus. You'll just have to have patience."

Five hours later another report arrived. It read, "Carl Stevens and Laura Wilde reported missing. According to Stevens Sr., they were in refrigerated suits in hot zone, and

are now over the safe period of operation of refrigerating units. Impossible to search for them."

"And I have to be cooped up in this tub another ten days!" Clyde groaned.

CHAPTER III

"YOU KNOW, Laura," Carl said, pulling a blade of the tough Venusian slope grass and sticking it in his teeth. "I keep thinking that dead native couldn't have come far before reaching the spot where we found him."

"I feel the same way," Laura said. They were sitting on the ground not far from the tunnel.

The ground dropped away at their feet. A thousand feet below began the Venusian jungle that covered most of Winkum, the major continent. Another thousand feet the other way, upward, was the almost flat ceiling of clouds that stretched unbroken to the horizon. And at their backs the steep slope of the Corscath Ridge rose into the clouds.

"What do you say we put on refrigerated suits and do a little exploring and see if we can't find where the native got that bag of rocks?" Carl suggested. "We could probably cover all the ground he could have been over in a couple of hours, and the suits are good for ten times that before the power pack for the refrigerating unit gives out."

"Your father stands a good chance of going broke on the tunnel, doesn't he," Laura said. At Carl's nod she continued. "The fact that one of the big V-A men came all the way up here to get those stones, and made us promise to be here when an even bigger official came from the Earth, makes those stones seem pretty valuable. If we could find a large deposit of them—"

"Say! You've hit it!" Carl exclaimed. "It's obvious. That native was a prospector, and those were samples. There has to be a large deposit of that stuff not far from where we found his body. We can stake out a large claim under the New Territory Acts, and Dad can recoupe his losses on the tunnel."

"That's what I was thinking," Laura said. "We haven't anything else to do—unless your father can get another crew to build the observatory building at the hot end of the tunnel, and that doesn't seem likely right now."

"We'll have to plan this so we don't get lost," Carl said. "We can plant a red searchlight at the tunnel opening to act as a beacon. We can take a couple of the hand generator flashlights with us. They'll stand the heat."

"Let's go get it all ready now," Laura said eagerly. "Then we can get an early start right after we sleep, and be able to do a lot of exploring in just a few hours."

THE BODY of the dead Venusian wasn't pleasant to look at now. Carl and Laura kept their eyes away from it, circling in an ever widening arc in search of some sign to indicate from which direction he had come.

The stones under their feet were smooth and treacherous, the largest less than a foot across. None of them had the appearance of the stones in the bag.

As their circling spread out it occasionally took them into the fog. Then the red light at the tunnel became an eerie disembodied thing.

But still the flashlights were not necessary. The light of the sun, refracted and reflected through countless fog particles, gave a uniform light sufficient to see everything at near them.

They were holding hands as they explored, now, so as not to get separated. Constantly they looked back at the red beacon light, to make sure they didn't wander too far.

The rod was lying between two slightly separated rocks. They saw it at the same time. It was six inches long and half an inch thick, and too straight and too round to be other than artificially made.

Carl lifted one of the boulders out of the way and picked it up. It was made of the same kind of stone that had been in the native's orange colored bag.

Laura and Carl studied it excitedly. Carl held it in his gloved hand between their transparent dome helmets so they could see it together.

Laura's foot slipped on a rock. She swayed against Carl. The rod touched the surface of his helmet. Instantly he heard words in the Venusian language. A mere fragment of speech before the rod lost contact in his effort to catch Laura and keep her from falling.

"Did you hear that?" Carl asked, looking around. "I thought I heard a native calling."

"No," Laura said, puzzled.

Carl frowned at the rod, remembering that it had touched his helmet while he had heard the voice. He raised it and placed it against his helmet again. At once the voice became audible. He touched it against Laura's helmet. She heard the voice too.

She took the rod from Carl and placed one end of it flat against her helmet and listened. Then she turned slowly, pausing when the rod pointed directly away from the red beacon light.

"It's directional," she said. "The voice sounds louder in this direction."

"Let me see," Carl demanded eagerly. He tried it and found she was

right.

"But how does it work?" Laura asked, mystified. "It's nothing but a rod made of that stone!"

"It's not as mysterious as it seems," Carl said. "Of course, the fact that this type of stone has three properties is something unusual; but the principle is understandable. The rod has a definite resonance wavelength. A radio wave of that wavelength reinforces itself and results in physical vibration. All other wavelengths of radio waves dampen themselves and die out. So if there's a radio transmitter of the right frequency it will cause this rod to vibrate at a radio frequency, and the strength of the vibration can be modulated by audio-frequency waves, so that audible sound will be produced. In other words, this is a directional radio receiver of the ultimately simple type."

"I think I read somewhere that some types of metals have that property at near absolute zero temperatures," Laura said slowly. She looked up, startled. "But that means that there is a radio transmitter somewhere near here, doesn't it?"

Carl nodded. "I was coming to that," he said. "The length of the radio wave must be somewhere around six inches. Unless it's designed along lines similar to this receiver rod, it means that there is a radio tower near here, so close that if there weren't any fog we could see it from where we are standing."

Laura peered uneasily into the fog. "But that would mean metals and radio tubes and—and—" She stopped, confused.

"And people," Carl completed the thought. "Venusians, rather. That poor devil we found the bag of stones on must have been carrying this rod, and dropped it when he got too weak

to know what he was doing. No doubt he was using it as a sort of compass, since it's directional."

"Then we can use it too!" Laura said eagerly. "We won't have to stay within sight of the beacon light."

"But that transmitter may be fifty miles from here!"

"Then how did that native cover the fifty miles?" Laura asked. "No. I think we'll run onto something before we go a mile."

"Guess you're right," Carl gave in. "Let's try it and see. But don't forget our main purpose. Let's keep our eyes open for rocks like those in that bag we had."

WITH LAURA holding the rod against her helmet and Carl holding her hand to steady her, they began the tedious descent of the rocky slope, slipping often, but never falling onto the hot stones.

Occasionally gusts of wind would tear at them. Now and then the fog would miraculously vanish about them, and the colorless landscape would be revealed for fifty yards in every direction. Then, as abruptly, the air would again assume white translucency that seemed to hold them suspended in a formless and directionless universe—directionless except for the almost intangible directional property of the monotonous native voice speaking in the rod of stone.

Neither Laura nor Carl could make sense out of what the voice was saying. After a time they realized that it was saying the same thing over and over again in exactly the same tone. Less than half of the words were familiar, and not enough of them to get a clear meaning.

Carl took the rod and placed it against his helmet after the first half hour.

"I'd say the voice is a recording," he said finally.

"That's what I thought," the girl agreed. "And I've been thinking something else. The natives don't have mechanical science—at least not that we know of. Do you think some secret group of humans could have a headquarters over here on the hot side? There might be other things besides the living stones over here. Maybe jewels or Uranium."

"I don't know," Carl said. "But should they keep it secret? I'm beginning to think maybe the native population of Winkum isn't all the population of Venus. We may discover a highly advanced scientific civilization here on the hot side."

"It would have to be, to be able to live where the temperature is so high," Laura said. "They would have to have sources of tremendous power to maintain refrigeration for any place large enough to hold many people."

"Unless it was underground. There could be underground caves, with tunnels leading from the other side of the Ridge. Cool winds could blow through those tunnels and provide the natural cooling system. Sometime in the past the natives could have found those openings and followed them."

"Then why did the native try to get back to the cool side of the Ridge by walking over blistering rocks?" Laura objected. "And why are the natives so afraid of this side of the Ridge? They claim it's ruled by a different god than Winkum."

"I don't know," Carl said. "But maybe we'll find out before long."

They walked on in silence. Only the rod made any sound, and that only when it was held against a helmet as a sounding board.

Finally they came to the transmitter.

THERE WASN'T much to it. It consisted of a large tombstone affair made of the living stone, with two flat discs of the same material on top, each about an inch thick and four feet in diameter, set so they were six inches apart, facing each other. It was obviously the transmitter, because the rod gave off the loudest sounds when pointed at it.

"Those two flat stone discs could serve as an antenna," Carl said. "I don't know how, but if they were made of metal, and were insulated, they would make some sort of short wave antenna. I wish I knew more about radio. There must be some sort of connection between the fact that those discs are six inches apart, and this rod is six inches long. But maybe even if I knew a lot about radio I wouldn't be able to figure it out. It's native, and the Venusians seem to have a different slant on science than we have. Maybe they've discovered principles we don't know anything about."

"What do we do now?" Laura asked. "Go back?"

"I don't know," Carl said thoughtfully. "There ought to be something around close. Maybe an opening to a cave or something. It wouldn't make sense to just have this transmitter stuck up here for no reason."

He placed the rod against his helmet again, idly. At once he heard something. It was a native voice, but it was now speaking in English.

"You are correct, Earthling," the voice spoke. "The transmitter also acts as a receiver of sound waves when someone is near it."

"Hey!" Carl said. "Listen to this!"

Laura took the rod and listened. She nodded excitedly and gave it back to Carl.

"We hear you," he said, placing it against his helmet again.

"At the base of the transmitter you will discover a hole into which the rod fits," the voice went on. "When you place it there it will cause part of the ground to drop slowly and reveal an opening."

"What about it?" Carl said to Laura, repeating what he had heard. "Maybe we're getting into something we shouldn't. I think we ought to go back and tell V-A what we've discovered. Then when we come back we'll have some support behind us. This way, if we get stuck no one will ever know what happened to us."

"I think you're right," Laura said. "We don't know what we'll be getting into. Let's go back. Anyway, the power packs on our suits won't allow us too much leeway for further exploration. We can call up that V-A official and tell him about it, then come back tomorrow."

"I'm afraid you won't have that opportunity," the voice said dryly. "You see, you are dependent upon the voice of the transmitter to guide you back the way you came. Without it you will become lost. That voice is now shut off, and will remain shut off. But you do not need to be afraid. You will not be harmed—if you do as I have told you."

Worriedly Carl explained to Laura. She took the rod.

"He's right," she said. "Without the voice we can't get our directions, and we can't see the red beacon from here."

"We could chance it," Carl suggested. "I don't like the idea of getting you into this. I wish now I'd come alone."

"Nonsense! I wouldn't have missed this for anything. Let's do as he suggested. After all, the natives aren't hostile."

"They can be mighty dangerous, and they're more subtle than an

oriental," Carl said. "Remember the history books? The natives almost succeeded in wiping out the first colonizers by 'neglecting' to warn them about the white, flesh-eating grubs that used to come up out of the ground every so often?"

"Even so, there's less danger in going ahead than there is in getting lost and getting cooked when our power packs give out."

"O.K.," Carl said reluctantly. He squatted and searched for the hole in the base of the transmitter. It was not hard to find. He slid the rod into it. The rod stopped with only an inch still protruding.

EVEN BEFORE he took his hand away from it he was aware that the transmitter was rising in front of him. It was an illusion. The ground on which he and Laura stood was sinking down. It was an elevator with a camouflaged floor. It sank ten feet and came to a stop. There was the opening of a dark tunnel in front of them, leading off toward a rectangle of light in the distance.

Carl and Laura stepped onto the smooth floor of the tunnel and began walking toward that distance light. The walls on either side of them were of black obsidian, radiating a heat that penetrated their suits uncomfortably, driving home the fact that they were at the mercy of the unseen owner of the voice that had spoken to them through the transmitter.

But now there was a wind blowing down the passage from ahead, forcing them to lean forward into it.

Carl turned on his flashlight. It bathed the dark passage with light, revealing the details on the walls, the the chisel marks on the walls, the worn unevenness of the floor produced by the passage of countless

feet over its surface.

As they progressed along the passage the rectangle of light seemed to stay the same distance away from them. Finally Laura remarked about this.

"I think the passage must curve a little," she said. "And what we see is a reflection on the wall far ahead of an opening even farther away."

"It slopes down a little, too," Carl added. "And we are going farther into the hot zone."

"It can't get much hotter," Laura said. "The water keeps the temperature around the boiling point even in the hottest part, doesn't it?"

"I don't know," Carl answered. "We won't have to worry about that though. What's this?"

He played his flashlight ahead. There was a niche in the wall. A ten foot tall native stood erect within the niche. His face was turned toward them. There was a smile on his lips. But there was something strange about him.

"Hello," Carl said in Venusian.

The native made no answer, and as Carl and Laura came nearer they realized he was not a living Venusian, but a lifelike statue! So perfectly formed was the statue that even when they stood close they seemed to feel the aura of life emanating from the erect form.

They looked up at the giant figure. How long had it been there? There were little differences between it and the normal Venusian. Its shoulders were a little more massive, its bearing somehow kinglike, even godlike. And yet...

"The nose!" Laura gasped. "It has a bridged nose, like we do!"

"So it has," Carl said wonderingly. "I looked right at it and never realized. And have you noticed that the stone the statue is made of re-

minds you of that pink stuff that is supposed to be alive?"

"Yes," Laura said. "And it has exactly the same shade of indigo as the natives. How can stone have the same color exactly?"

"You'd almost think a real live Venusian could suddenly separate from that statue and step down." Carl laughed nervously. "Come on. Let's go."

They turned to leave. Blocking their way were several shapes. Carl turned his flashlight on them. They were Venusians; but unlike the natives Carl and Laura had seen before, their faces were completely human. Instead of having noses like apes, their noses were bridged and straight, like that of the statue.

"Come," one of them said in Venusian. The others stepped forward and formed a guard around Carl and Laura.

"Is this a welcoming committee?" Laura asked Carl nervously.

The one walking beside Laura seemed to understand her words. He stared down at her from the height of his seven-and-a-half feet.

"Our god is angry at your coming," he said somberly. "We take you to his high priest."

"You mean," Carl said, stumbling over the Venusian words, "that we are to be sacrificed to your god?"

"Sacrificed?" echoed the native. "No. Not slain. You will be made into gods. What greater punishment can be given a mortal?"

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS Captain Walters who hunted up Clyde Masters a few hours after the report of Carl's and Laura's disappearance. He found him in the library of the ship, deeply immersed in books on Venusian subjects.

"I've been looking for you all over," Walters said. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about things."

"And I've been doing a lot of reading, George," Clyde Masters said, looking up. "It hasn't gotten me anywhere, though."

"Well, look," Walters said, sitting down. "Those stones are still intact, aren't they? Why not carry on the experiments? I've thought of several lines. One is, grind up some of the stuff into a fine powder and mix it with some kind of paint, and paint a hollow box with it, with a thermometer inside. See if the stuff keeps the interior of the box at 100.03 degrees regardless of outside temperature."

"Sounds like a good idea," Clyde said. "Got any more?"

"Yes. Microphotographs of its structure, tests of its electrical conductivity—that should be interesting, especially if the stuff does conduct a current. I wish I had some of the stuff to experiment with. I'd gladly risk blowing myself up to find out more about it. Can it be stabilized at any other temperature than that of the normal body temperature of a Venusian? It stands to reason it can. It stands to reason that its temperature isn't a cosmic standard, but one incorporated into the substance by whoever designed it."

"Say that again," Clyde said, sitting forward.

"I merely said," Captain Walters said, "that that temperature of 100.03 degrees is not a cosmic standard, but incorporated into the substance by whoever designed it."

"That's what I thought you said," Clyde said. "It gave me a flash of inspiration. You've heard of Wood's metal? It's an alloy with a melting point low enough to melt at the touch of a flame from an ordinary

fire. Here's something else: ice that is melting stays at 32 degrees regardless of the temperature around it, *so long as it remains ice*. And it absorbs a lot of heat in freezing, and gives off a lot in melting."

"But this substance doesn't seem to change its state," Walters objected.

"How do we know it doesn't?" Clyde asked. "And how do we know what state it's in—except that it's solid—and 'alive'."

"I see what you mean," Captain Walters said excitedly. "And here's something else to support that theory. Sulphur has different states in which it behaves differently. Drop molten sulphur into cold water and it becomes rubbery and plastic instead of crystalline."

"Right," Clyde agreed. "So maybe we can get a picture of what happened to the stuff that caused the explosion. Let's start on the hypothesis that 100.03 degrees is a critical temperature for the stuff. That is, in order for it to gain in temperature it must change its state. Also, for it to drop from the critical temperature it must change state. And to change state it must give off or absorb a tremendous amount of energy in the form of heat."

"Then we have the report on the stuff changing its state from freezing," Captain Walters said. "When that happened it became ordinary quartz—or maybe quartz with some special impurity in it that hasn't been analyzed yet."

"Like plastic sulphur becoming crystalline sulphur," Clyde said. "O.K. That's comprehensible. Now we come to the other change—produced by pouring more and more heat into the stuff until it changes. Most substances melt when that's done, but this stuff produced a gigantic explo-

sion, and then was found unchanged. From the reports it wasn't even cracked by what happened. How would we account for that on the basis of our theory?"

"Well," Captain Walters said thoughtfully, "I think we must recognize that the nature of that change is tied in with the nature of the state the stuff is in at 100.03 degrees. We can bring in the concepts of kinetic and potential energy very nicely. We can say that kinetic energy of the heat absorbed is transformed into potential energy in some way. That disposes of it without changing the temperature of the stuff at all. The mechanism of storage doesn't matter right now. It could be analogous to that stored in a watch spring when it's wound up—tension and stress rather than molecular activity: perhaps even a form of nuclear tension not yet known to our science. Then suddenly—bingo! All the stored up potential energy is released, maybe as radiant energy—a searing blast radiating outward and raising the temperature of everything in its path, while the components of the stuff sort of relax back to normal."

"You know something?" Clyde Masters said. "That sounds almost exactly like a description from a physics book on how an atom emits its energy-packet. I wonder..."

He became lost in thought. After awhile he shook himself. "I'd better get off some orders," he muttered.

FRED NELSON, O. I. C. of V-A troubleshooters on Winkum nodded his head sympathetically at John Stevens' account of the disappearance of his son and secretary, the two missing special-built suits with refrigerating units in them, the red spotlight installed at the hot end of the tunnel, the fact that they had

been gone forty-eight hours, and the power packs on the suits that were good only for ten hours, or twelve at the outside.

The contractor's lips trembled a little in spite of his self control. Nelson felt very sorry for him, but hid it. This was the time and place for expressions of hope, not pity.

"I think you're worrying about something there's no need to worry about, sir," he said. "Consider what facts we have. The dead native obviously couldn't have gotten where he was from this side of the Ridge, since he was already there when the breakthrough occurred. Therefore he must have come from some place over there where it's possible to live. That means there must be caves or something cool enough to live in.

"We can safely conclude that unless your son and secretary met with a fatal accident they would have been back before their suits gave out—unless they discovered these caves, or whatever they are, and have shut off their suits and are exploring them. When they get through exploring they will simply turn their suits on again and come back. Don't you think that sounds reasonable?"

John Stevens examined the short, pudgy figure and keen intelligent eyes of the dark-haired operative with a new respect.

"The way you put it," he said with new hope, "it sounds like that's what must have happened. I know Laura is a sensible, cautious girl. Carl is inclined to be overly enthusiastic about his ideas and activities; but Laura would have served as a restraining influence to keep him from venturing too far to get back. Maybe you're right."

"You bet I'm right," Fred said with an air of confidence he did not feel inside. "I came up in my copter. I

have some men coming up in a truck with some equipment. We're going after those two. I'll bet a year's salary we find them alive."

"You've given me new hope," John Stevens said gratefully. "How soon will the truck get here?"

"It should be here any minute now," Fred said.

Half an hour later it arrived. There were six men on it. They drove the truck up as close as they could get to the track where the ore cars came out of the hole in the hill and started loading searchlights and power cables into the cars.

Fred and John watched the loading.

"Those are infrareds," Fred explained. "And we have special goggles. We'll be able to see a long ways into the fog. When we get set up we may be able to see where they went right away."

Two hours later one of the infrared searchlights had been set up at the tunnel opening on the other side of the Ridge.

John Stevens, and everyone else in the party, had put on the red-sensitive goggles before donning their refrigerated suits.

"If this spot doesn't reach far enough," Fred said. "We can string out a hundred yards of cable and put up a second one."

The light went on. It seemed to bore a hole in the fog that went in and in until it ended against a circle of boulder-strewn ground.

John Stevens pointed out where the dead Venusian lay, and the man who directed the spotlight sent it in explorative journeys from that point into the fog-enshrouded distances.

"They'd have very slow going across ground like that," Fred commented. "But so much the better. That means we will probably be able

to see where they wound up." He looked at Mr. Stevens and added hastily, "It will be a cave opening or some sort of structure. I'm positive of that."

But the spot explored every square foot until it was reaching nothing but fogginess at the end of its beam, and nothing but boulders had been revealed.

"I'd say we penetrated half a mile," the man guiding the spotlight said. "We'd better set up another farther in."

"You talked yourself into a job, Joe," Fred said. "All of you get on it. I'll guide the spotlight so you can see where you're going."

IT TOOK an hour to carry the heavy reflector over the round rocks and string out the power cable. When it was done Fred fixed the first light directly on the second, and he and John Stevens picked their way across the rough terrain after the others.

Fred stopped at the dead Venusian and examined him and the neighboring ground while Mr. Stevens waited with averted eyes. They both felt a little sick as they walked on. In both their minds was the question: would they find Carl and Laura like that—cooked so thoroughly that overdone flesh was falling away from whitened bones?

The excited shouts of the men reached them soon after. They hurried their steps, peering through the fog until they could make out what the men had discovered.

Almost at the limit of penetration of the second spotlight could be made out something shaped like a tombstone with a round shape perched on top.

"What is it?" one of the men asked.

"That's for us to find out," Fred



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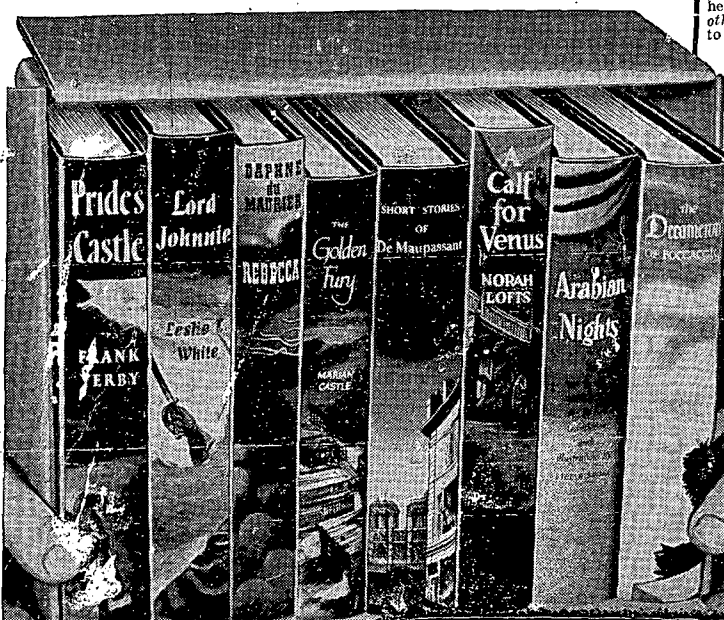
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